



## VENUS REVISITED

**Reflecting sights/sites of beauty  
and its embodiments**

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Documentation and commentary  
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# contents

<b>Introduction</b>	6
<b>1. Historical Reflections on Beauty</b>	
1.1 Venus	9
1.2 The Mirror	19
1.3 The Garden	30
1.4 The Dissection	38
<b>2. Contemporary Representations of Women and Beauty</b>	
2.1 Fracturing the Image of the Female Body	44
2.2 The Reflection	47
2.3 A Return to Nature	48
2.4 An Avenue to Beauty	50
<b>3. The Practical Body of Work</b>	
3.1 Introduction	52
3.2 Individual Works	60
3.3 Formal and Technical Choices	78
<b>Appendix: Flower Symbolisms</b>	80
<b>Bibliography</b>	82
<b>List of Illustrations</b>	87

# introduction

According to legend, Venus, the mythological goddess of beauty and love, was born from water, which is referred to as her original mirror (Melchior-Bonnet, 2001: 213). The story of the birth of Venus as traced through Hesiod's *Theogony* (circa 800 BC) was brought about by an act of male castration. It was Gaea (Mother Earth), the earliest female goddess, who convinced Cronos to perpetrate this deed against his own father, Saturn. As Cronos flung his father's severed genitals into the sea, Venus, the physical incarnation of female beauty, was created from the rising foam of the ocean (Mullins, 1995: 39).

This very origination of the goddess of beauty and sexual love in an act of male castration can be seen to express deep-seated anxieties and the danger men associate with women's beauty and sexuality. Venus at once embodies both an ideal of female beauty, and qualities of destruction and transgression. Similarly the conflicting associations between appearance and nature have been at the centre of the way in which female beauty has been understood to reflect the qualities of goodness or evil. The definition of the good and the evil woman would become a central concern of the early Christian Church and women's physical beauty was habitually denounced as sinful and morally dangerous. This preoccupation would be mirrored in visual representations of idealised female beauty, through which the body acted as a site for the inscription of cultural and ideological meanings and values.

The mirror itself, as one of the first symbols of Venus, would play a fundamental role in the negation of women's physical beauty. The mirror as the reflector of women's external beauty would come to represent her assumed vanity and simultaneous immorality. Aspects of Italian high Renaissance, where external appearance and

moral character were separated enabled a celebratory representation of physical beauty within patriarchal constraints. The anxiety surrounding the connotations of female beauty would however again become a significant subject in Dutch 17th Century art that would continue to warn against the dangers of feminine beauty. These fluctuating perceptions of the idealised body would reflect women as sinner, bearer of sacred love, temptress and divinity.

In this project the idealised body of Venus represents an uncomfortable whole. She symbolises the richly divergent, contrasting, and often thematic concerns of female beauty that my work has attempted to represent. She signifies and originates the centuries of fluctuating meaning and contesting truths about women and the way in which they are represented that are at the centre of my research – in an image that resists resolution.

As the title of the body of practical work implies, *Venus Revisited* points to a journey of return. It refers to a recurrence of ideas about the idealised female body informed by its origins in Greek myth. Venus still informs current Western visual culture – the female body remains 'the map on which we mark our meanings' (Mullins, 1985: 331).

Section 1.1 of this document investigates aspects of the mythological Venus that influenced subsequent perceptions of female beauty. The history of conflicting values of goodness and badness and the allegories associated with the female body have profoundly affected the way in which we understand beauty and female identity. As Warner states:

...allegories of the female form inform and animate many myths which have, in constant interplay, enriched and reinforced, maintained and reshaped our present identities as inheritors of classical and Christian culture. (Warner, 1985: xxiii)

In this document I trace the use of particular

themes and iconographic elements that were instrumental in giving meaning to the historical representations of the idealised body that the practical body of work references. As I borrow elements from art historical representations of female beauty in the practical body of work, I approach these images as 'ways of telling highly selective truths' and articulations of dominant social ideologies (Leppert, 1996: 9). In the present recontextualisation of elements of historical images in my work I ascribe to Randolph's understanding of the reproduction of aspects of 'old artworks' (Randolph 2002: 40). This is based on the view that an artwork's new context will affect its meaning and understanding, while some historical implication 'will' still remain inherent.

A picture is a historical record of what its creator noticed and considered worth noticing within a given culture at a particular moment. People study history in an attempt to understand the present; hence past and present are fundamentally joined — by a two-way street. As the past constructs us (we are to a certain extent what *we were*), we in turn reconstruct the past, perpetually rewriting it out of our own sets of concerns, understandings, investments, desires and perceived needs. (Leppert, 1996: 10)

In Sections 1.2 and 1.3 the mirror and the garden, and their relationship to female beauty are traced through the late Middle Ages, Renaissance and Mannerist periods. These are the periods from which I draw in my practical work. The aim has been to give expression to the iconographic and allegorical representations that gave the female body value and meaning at these particular times. At the same time the aim was to re-evaluate and reinterpret these themes in the present. The mirror associated with women, beauty and vanity since antiquity currently remains a 'privileged and vulnerable site of femininity' (Melchior-Bonnet, 2002: 271). It acts as an important thematic aspect in the practical body of work. While tracing its historical significance in relation to the above-mentioned periods, I also consider contemporary attitudes towards 'female vanity'. The garden and

iconographical elements, such as flowers and fruit that suggest the traditional association of women to nature, as both signifiers of fecundity and the treacherous 'other', are explained on in Section 1.3, while the changing significance of nature is discussed in Section 2.3.

I will attempt to show the persistence and longevity of these symbols and, more importantly, the themes of beauty that they exemplify. The effects and the multiple meanings of these 'migrating signs' associated with the female form relate directly to Baxandall's notion of 'the image as an active response to past visual forms' (Randolph, 2002: 14). As seen in the physical structure of my practical body of work, the multiple layers and the view into the interior of the body refer to this multivalence, while at the same time evoking the ideas of the internalisation of past tropes in the construction of feminine identities.

Section 1.4 considers aspects of the scientific practice of dissection pertinent to my practical body of work. As aspects of 19th Century medical and anatomical illustration are appropriated, this section expounds on 19th Century western scientific programmes that saw women as objects of investigation relegated to the realm of nature as the 'other', while also expanding on the view of the woman's body as a tempting vessel of beauty that disguises an interior of repulsion, danger and sin. In developing these ideas I have drawn on Jordanova (1989) in particular. This then develops ideas around the shifting associations of goodness and evil, seduction and repulsion associated with the female body.

Representations of women and beauty by contemporary artists are investigated in Section 2. Here I consider how women artists of the late 20th and early 21st Century have re-interpreted the woman's body and subverted traditional representations of idealised beauty. This is particularly focused on the current employment

and interpretation of the mirror and nature in relation to themes of female beauty and the body. Contemporary strategies, such as the use of visual 'dissection' and fragmentation of the female body as a means to deny the traditional focus on the exterior body as the exclusive site of a women's beauty are also considered, and underline the importance of the interior. This section also considers current ideas about beauty as a theme in art. The 20th Century perception of traditional representations of female beauty as both 'politically' and 'aesthetically' backward (Steiner, 2001) rejected images focused on beauty as a theme in the practice and theory of art. Beauty as the sub-sister of the sublime existed rather as a shadowed antithesis of modernist agendas and feminist inspection (Steiner, 2001: xv-xxv). By the 1990s the word beauty and with it the 'beautiful' female subject, had largely disappeared from art practice and theory (Benezra & Viso, 1999: 35). Beauty had become 'quarantined' (Shjeldahl, 1996: 161) for nearly a century. The validity of beauty as an artistic theme and concern has, however, returned and allows a new context in which to consider historical images of female beauty.

The practical body of work is introduced in Section 3. This section is focused on the re-articulation and re-consideration of historical idealisations of female beauty in my own work. Here I discuss the strategy of layering as a form of 'visual dissection' that enables the fracturing of the ideal and the disruption of the beautiful body by exposing aspects of the interior body. Elements of nature – fauna and flora that become part of the physiological aspects of the figures in the practical work visually – relay the conflicting associations of traditional *vanitas* symbolism and nature in relation to the woman. These features draw on the woman's relationship to nature, while simultaneously acting as ornament. The cabinets that display these images are discussed in relation to references made to preservation and

cataloguing central to the herbarium and medical collections as well as furniture associated with the female boudoir. The use of glass references the mirror, themes of vanity and notions pertaining to both the male and female gaze in the perception of beauty. Glass as a transparent medium allows the ability to see through images while simultaneously enabling a reflection of the viewer – a double. The viewer's reflected presence plays a pivotal part in this work as the reader and viewer remain active in interpreting and inventing the meaning of the work. They therefore confront and confound the monolith of an all-encompassing truth. With this in mind, it is not my wish to simply exchange one meaning for another in an attempt to gain or regain some sense of truth in relation to the idealised body of beauty. In contrast, it is my aim to draw attention to the very inconsistencies and multiple meanings that deny a conclusive reading and response to the historical idealised body and its identity.

Finally, this project does not attempt a comprehensive reading of past representations of beauty. Nor does it suggest that these have irrevocably constructed contemporary ideas about women. Rather I have chosen themes that have had both personal resonance, and have contributed to the way in which I understand my own inherited attitudes to beauty and sexuality. In the end the practical body of work attempts to incorporate and appropriate those features of past representations which reveal attitudes to beauty (both historical ones and my own). At the same time the work suggests that these are endless reflections of changing attitudes, rather than images of the truth. I hope that the work will reveal that, as a woman and artist in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, one can rehabilitate past images of beauty without simultaneously affirming the negative and stereotyped ideas they once asserted.



# 1. historical reflections on beauty

## 1.1 venus

Whether in the form of a direct representation, or more elusively, almost as a vestigial after-image, traces of her (Venus) presence can be found throughout visual culture. (Gronberg, 2000: 142)

Through the ages Venus and her idealised body have played host to multiple meanings fraught with contradiction. This situation has fed into the representation of the ideal female body creating a bearer of complex historical and mythological baggage. While the body of Venus has habitually exhibited the exterior characteristics of ideal beauty of the different epochs investigated here, the values attached to these external representations of beauty have fluctuated between conflicting associations of goodness and badness, love and lust, celebratory adulation and derision. This section acts as an introduction to aspects of the mythological Venus that would inform the perception, interpretation and representation of the beautiful woman from antiquity and through my main areas of interest, namely the Middle Ages, Italian High Renaissance and Dutch 17th Century art. A comprehensive and absolute account of this vast historical time frame is beyond the scope of this dissertation. Instead the attempt is rather to highlight specific attitudes and examples that inform the concerns of the practical body of work this document accompanies. It elucidates the relationship between the sexual, female beauty and danger, creation/procreation and chaos that potentially exist even prior to the predominantly derogatory moralistic attitudes of the Middle Ages and Dutch 17th Century. Simultaneously this part of the document traces the celebratory attitude towards Venus during the Italian High Renaissance. Hence there is the attempt to convey the notion of contestation and multiplicity that constantly inhabit the female form of beauty and sexuality.

Through the following focus on Venus, I attempt to underline the idealised body's significance as a bearer of loaded meaning, and to appreciate the 'continuing significance' of this aspect of her form in the present day (Warner, 1985: 87).

### Venus in Antiquity and aspects of early Christian interpretation



Figure 1. Artist Unknown. 1st Century AD. Venus. (Bowman, 2002: 1).

As seen in the legend of Venus's birth, recounted in the introduction of this dissertation, ideal female beauty can be associated with sexual danger and chaos from inception. This notion can be expanded on when considering the goddess' role in the creation of Greek mythology's earliest mortal woman, Pandora (Warner, 1985: 213-214). This story can be traced through Hesiod's *Works and Days* (circa 800 BC), where Venus joins other gods to fashion Pandora, who Venus imbues with beauty (Warner, 1985: 213-214). The beautiful Pandora – the 'all-gifted' (Hall, 1996: 233) – was said to be a divine retribution from the gods to punish humankind (after Prometheus stole fire from the gods) according to the myth. Subsequent to becoming the wife of a human, Pandora would not contain her curiosity and opened a box from the gods that was to remain unopened. With this inquisitiveness all ills that would henceforth plague humankind were said to be unleashed, with only hope remaining in the recesses of the urn (Biederman, 1992: 253). This myth did not function in isolation, as the early



1 This strategy would progressively intervene with regard to the meaning ascribed to Venus and female beauty.

Christian clergy would construct comparisons between Pandora and the biblical Eve (Hall, 1996: 233). These comparisons heavily underline the deceptive and tempting danger of beauty of both original mythological and biblical woman. Here one can perceive the active intervention of the Christian imagination as it endeavours to align and incorporate paganism into its own agenda and ideology.<sup>1</sup> In the much recounted Christian narrative known as *The Temptation*, Eve's curiosity lead her to eat the fig/apple of knowledge so that her 'eyes will be opened and you will be like the gods knowing both good and evil' (Hall, 1996: 4–5). She would in turn tempt Adam to do the same. As a result the pair was expelled from Eden to contend with a life of hardship and ills, like the beautiful and curious Pandora and her human compatriots – in this case beyond the realms of paradise. Milton alerts us to the persistence of creating comparisons between these Christian and mythological figures on the basis of their beauty and nudity in *Paradise Lost*, IV (1667).

Here in close recess  
With Flowers, Garlands, and sweet-smelling Herbs,  
Espoused Eve deck first her nuptial Bed,  
And heav'nly Quires the Hymenaeal sung,  
What day the genial Angel to our Sire  
Brought her in naked beauty more adorn'd  
More lovely than Pandora, whom the Gods  
Endowed with all their gifts, and O too like  
In sad event, when the unwiser Son  
Of Japhet brought by Hermes, she ensnar'd  
Mankind with her faire looks to be aveng'd  
On him who had stole Joves authentic fire. (Milton in  
Warner, 1985: 222)

In this mythological account it is Venus, the fountain of fertility and beauty, who imbibes Pandora with the qualities of good looks and sexual desirability that are instrumental in the correlation of ideal female beauty with dangerous seduction, sin and catastrophe. In hindsight the Christian church plays a definite part in the perception of her as a secular Eve who threatens humanity (Warner, 1985: 214–16). Consequently, in Venus, Pandora and Eve, the goddess and the

mortal, the correlation of beauty and sexuality can be seen as a catalyst for potential ruin.

The association of external bodily beauty with transgression and destruction was, however, not always the case. The first civilisations of China, Egypt, Africa and the Arab regions linked the concept of beauty to the physical body, which was traditionally associated with the values of 'truth' and 'goodness' (Ross, 1998: 237). While the ancient Greeks measured beauty through formalised arrangements like 'order, symmetry and proportion' (Benezra & Viso, 1999: 87), ideal beauty did not function independently as it was also simultaneously associated with 'the true' and 'the good' (Donoghue, 2003: 63). So Sappho (610–580 BC) utters "What is beautiful is good, and what is good will soon be beautiful" (Ross, 1998: 238) and the Delphic Oracle intones "The most beautiful is the most just" (Eco, 2004: 37). These criteria also presided over the sculpted human figure and artists followed a rigorous standard of ideal harmony and physical dimensions (Benezra & Viso, 1999: 89) to portray bodily beauty that concurrently sought to convey the virtue of the spirit (Eco, 2004: 45). For the Greeks the perception of beauty consisted of the entire being, both exterior attributes and incorporeal virtues (Freedman, 1986: 59). It is in Greek sculpture that we are first introduced, under these criteria, to Venus, the goddess of love and personification of ideal female beauty.



Figure 2. Artist Unknown. 2nd Century BC. *Venus de Milo*. (Arscoat & Scott, 2000: 2).

Another mythological account of Venus comes to us via Homer (Greek) in the *Odyssey* (between 800 and 600 BC) and through Ovid's (Roman) *Metamorphoses* (AD 8) (Hall, 1996: 320). Here the goddess takes on the role of adulterer. Venus as the spouse of the Vulcan, the disabled god of fire, became enamored with Mars. This infatuation would lead to an affair that was observed by Helios who would enlighten Vulcan. The dismayed Vulcan in turn created an imperceptible netting to trap the lovers in the sexual act and reveal their disgrace to the rest of the gods. (When regarding the trapped pair, Mercury mischievously commented "Oh, for the same opportunity!" (Hall, 1996: 320).) According to mythological accounts this infidelity was not a solitary incident. Venus reputedly had a multitude of lovers including Adonis (Impelluso, 2002: 240), Bacchus (Hall, 1996: 252),<sup>2</sup> even mortals. Consequently a lascivious nature became attributed to the goddess of beauty that would arguably inform early Christian notions of Venus as a dangerous and deceiving incarnation of sinful lust and carnality beyond the bounds of marriage (Rubin, 2000: 29).

While mythological figures were not beyond criticism during antiquity, their escapades were generally viewed in a light-hearted fashion. In line with this attitude toward beauty, particularly two dispositions were ascribed to the character of the goddess of beauty and sexual love (Hagen, 1996: 33). The first persona was that of a playful and carefree adulterous divinity. The other characteristics associated with the goddess were those of 'harmony, proportion and balance, a civilizing influence'. As an embodiment of sensuality and beauty Venus was commonly seen as a positive life-source and not as a bearer of catastrophe and detriment (Hagen, 1996: 33). While these attitudes towards beauty and its female incarnation were prevalent during antiquity, it is possible to recognise the potential for the instability and incongruity regarding the ideal body of beauty in relation to the myths that inform Venus – love and beauty encountering treachery, danger and destruction.

### Aspects of Venus in the Middle Ages

During the Middle Ages Venus and the female body of beauty became permeated with Christian thought and was subsumed into 'the lexicon of moral argument' (Rubin, 2000: 31). The Middle Ages exhibited a pronounced anxiety regarding the connection between morality, sexuality and the female body of beauty (Grössinger, 1997: 15, xiii). There existed a distinct concern to make a distinction between the woman of virtue and the woman of immorality (Mullins, 1985: 17):

One of the aspects of interest in the position of mythological Venus during the Middle Ages is Euhemeristic philosophy.<sup>3</sup> This theory suggests that the pagan gods originated from the adoration and worship of human heroes. To the Greeks, Euhemerism was influential in explicating the derivation of the gods, and this conception would persist even later on. Accordingly, during the Middle Ages, the gods are frequently written into historical accounts where they are positioned together with Christian figures of importance. So, for example, Ado of Vienna in *Chronicles of Six Ages of the World*, recalling the Exodus of Moses from Egypt, refers to Prometheus and his pursuits as akin in epoch (Seznec, 1972: 15) and as a result a synthesis of mythological and biblical history is facilitated. Similarly pagan gods were also considered to be the fountainheads of different nations and we find several princes, nobles and even Christian clergy aligning themselves with these ideas. Many even considered themselves to be the offspring of mythological Venus (Seznec, 1972: 183). The influence of Euhemeristic philosophy would continue into the Renaissance as Polydoré Virgil in *De inventaribus* (1499) articulates:

And whatsoever things may be attributed by us to Saturn, Jove, Neptune, Dionysus, Apollo, Aesculapius, Ceres, Vulcan, and to such others as have the name of gods, we have attributed to them as mortal men, and not as gods, even though we call them by that name. (Seznec, 1972: 22)

<sup>2</sup> This is important in regarding the reception of Venus and the body beautiful during the Middle Ages and Renaissance, as even during its very height, the chastity of women was a significant cultural preoccupation.

<sup>3</sup> As pertaining to Greek mythographer Euhemerus, 316 BC.

And so he accredits to Venus the tutoring of 'courtesans in the act of love' (Seznec, 1972: 22). The movement of Euhemeristic philosophy draws attention to the perception of the mythological Venus as not simply a supernatural being. In addition to being a divinity, she was also perceived as once being a person.

But this philosophy was not to have as much influence on visual representation. Characteristically of art during the Middle Ages, the mythological Venus became an allegorical figure. While still aligned to beauty and sensual love, she became subsumed by morality as the gods were incorporated within Christian ideology (Rubin, 2000: 31). If anything, the perception of Venus as once being human allowed her to be aligned with the assumed sins of mortal women. There existed a pronounced angst to differentiate pictorially between the 'good woman' and the 'bad' (Mullins, 1985: 17). Incapable of simply dispensing with the pagan gods, as they were enmeshed in cultural practices such as science and astrology, they were given meaning that made them compliant to Christian doctrine. This can be seen as actively in contrast to the Euhemeristic notions of mythological Venus as an individual human or even a goddess. Venus became subsumed by concepts of vice and virtue aligned with mortals.

Venus' nudity was influential in facilitating the above mentioned as the alignment of sin and nudity. In particular, alignment of the evils of the flesh with the naked female body (Mullins, 1985: 58) was a central ideological concern of the Christian church. Nudity and nakedness equaled sexuality, therefore only a 'non-sexual' woman could possibly be a woman of virtue (Mullins, 1985: 19). The ideal state for a woman was virginity, and sexuality was only acceptable for reproduction within the bounds of marriage and certainly not for female enjoyment (Mullins, 1985: 19). Mullins notes in *The Painted Witch*:

...the most intense preoccupation with the theme of women's virtue took place during the fifteenth century, and then again during the period about a hundred years following the impact of the Counter-Reformation in the mid-sixteenth century. (Mullins, 1985: 20-21)

In most visual representations of mythological Venus and the 'bad' woman, we see the depiction of what is considered as beautiful and fashionable at that time. During the Middle Ages the idealised female body did not conform to a set structure of precise dimensions in either its evaluation or its rendering. To a large extent this can be attributed to the depreciation of the physical in favour of beauty of the soul (Eco, 2004: 77). However, ideal female beauty did comply with a model typecast, namely that of a blue-eyed flaxen blond, with milky white skin, cheeks either 'lily-white or rose-red', and teeth as white as pearls. Fixed and standardised summations of these existed (Marwick, 1988: 68). These perceptions are emphasised by the literature of the time as a poem by Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375) recognises:

#### *The Beautiful Woman*

Snow-white pearls of the orient  
Between rubies of bright vermillion  
Whence an angelic smile  
Often seem Venus and Jove together  
As the crimson roses and lilies white  
Spread their colours everywhere  
Without any art diminishing it  
Her golden locks and curls an aura make  
Above her joyfull forehead, a sight of which  
Love is dazzled by wonder;  
And all the parts do match  
Those mentioned above, in equal proportion  
In her that resembles a true angel. (Boccaccio in Eco, 2004: 160)

There was a perceived fascination with slimness in the representations of the Gothic female body, which at times revealed the skeletal structure embedded beneath the casing of the skin (Hollander, 1993: 98). This trend united 'the appropriate view of mortal flesh subject to decay with an obvious relish in their specific erotic charm' (Hollander, 1993: 98). This portrayal of the



ideal opened up the potential for erotic consumption and simultaneous condemnation. Venus and idealised female beauty were therefore portrayed as young, sylph-like and protracted, the curved abdomen extending beyond the breasts as a suggestion of fecundity (Hagen, 1996: 51). Beautiful women were typically portrayed according to this stereotype in most European paintings of the Middle Ages and Eve, Venus and the female sinner would be similarly depicted.

This is a remarkable phenomenon as during this period (as in antiquity), there was consummate association between exterior appearance and



Figure 3. Meister Casper. 14th Century. *Venus of Horta*. (Young, 2002: 183).

'internal' morals (Marwick, 1988: 68). Beauty was goodness (Eco, 1986: 22) and virtue as we see in the *Courtly Love Romances* of Chrétien de Troyes, – the ugly where necessarily evil (Marwick, 1988: 68). In the case of Venus, as with Eve and the mortal woman of vanity, their very didactic nature and moral chastisement were aligned to their beauty and would not be separated. As Solnit states, '...conflating the feminine with the good has never been an easy project...because beauty speaks to the body' (Solnit, 2001: 207), and to this one can add as clarification the *desires* of the body.



Figure 4. Meister Casper. 14th Century. *Venus of Horta* (detail) (Young, 2002: 183).

### Aspects of Venus in the Italian High Renaissance

During the Renaissance the mutable appearance of beauty was attested to. Venus and the ideal female body became more substantial and fuller than its Medieval counterpart, exhibiting wider shoulders. A tapered, slim waist became viewed as unattractive. Breasts remained petite, but the abdomen, which continued to be a focus in paintings, became more realistic in its depiction (Hagen, 1996: 51). The change in the characteristics of beauty were, however, not extreme and this can be attested to by the similarities between the poem by Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–1375) (p 12) and that of Edmund Spenser's (1552 – 1599) sonnet (below). Again the ideal beauty conformed to set conventions of golden tresses, milky skin, ruby coloured lips and pearl-like teeth (Tinagli, 1997: 85–86).

#### Sonnet 15

For loe my love do in her selfe containe  
All the worlds riches that may farre be found,  
If Saphyres, loe her eyes be Saphyres plaine,  
If Rubies, loe hir lips be rubies sound;  
If Pearls, hir teeth be pearls both pure and round;  
If Yvorie, her forehead yvory weene;  
If Gold, her locks are finest gold on ground;  
If silver, her faire hands are silver sheene;  
But that which fairest is, but few behold,  
Her mind adorned with vertues manifold. (Spencer in  
Ferguson, Salter & Stallworthy, 1996: 167)

- 4 The Medici's bard Poliziano would give talks on antiquity's authors such as Ovid. This humanist acted as a key promoter of classical studies in Florence and was the author of the well-known saying: "Athens lies not in ruins, but brought her scholars, mice and men to set up house in Florence" (Hagen, 1996: 32).
- 5 Lucie-Smith in *Sexuality in Western Art* (1991: 42) picks up on this phenomenon when discussing Hieronymus Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1506). He contends that Bosch, as an exponent of the declining Middle Ages (Muller, 1997: 57) strictly adheres to the ideal Gothic body – representing the body's 'nakedness' as dejected rather than an exultant embodiment of physicality.

While the characteristics ascribed to ideal female beauty would not change dramatically, the Italian High Renaissance would exhibit a significantly altered *approach* towards Venus and the female body of beauty. Mythology played a significant role as a source of inspiration for the artists at this time as seen represented in works of art produced during the Renaissance. Groups like the Neo-Platonists associated with Lorenzo de Medici, that included Marsilio Ficino in Florence, were influential in facilitating a fascination with and enjoyment of ancient civilizations of Greece and Rome.<sup>4</sup> This preoccupation included Venus and the ideal body of beauty and sexuality. While much of the interest was focused on the literature of antique cultures, it steadily diffused into artistic production as a thematic and aesthetic concern, particularly in relation to the ideal human figure of beauty and importantly its celebration. (Martindale, 1966: 10). It is a change in attitude rather than re-appearance that is at stake here (Seznec, 1972: 3). With Venus and the idealised female body in a sense returning to antiquity and its ideals, humanist philosophy contested Medieval social and religious strictures (Marwick, 1988: 71) and deemed this subject worthy of adoration. This change in attitude towards beauty was also inculcated in the depiction of the idealised female body when compared to the Medieval body that appears rigid and tautened<sup>5</sup> in contrast to the more classically inspired and fluid ideals of the Renaissance. The female form, especially in the manifestation of Venus, became vital to Italian Renaissance art, and as such an informant of the beautiful. This beauty was not sanctioned with moral condemnation. Instead it exhibited rather pertinent boundaries. While it cannot be denied that Italy at the time of the Renaissance was a patriarchal-based society, it did allow for a condition where beauty and the body were sites of enjoyment for both men and women. However, one has to stress *conditions* – as women's enjoyment of the body was only sanctioned within the bounds of marriage where

the female body could be legally controlled (Hagen, 1996: 50).

Instructive in regarding this attitude toward Venus and the implicit beauty and sexuality of her body are the perceptions of the influential, 15th Century Neo-Platonist Marsilio Ficino. The all-encompassing celebration of Venus is relayed by his perception of the theme of the twin Venuses. This refers to sacred and profane love – discerning between *Venus Vulgaris* and *Venus Coelestis* – which was first devised by Plato in his *Symposium* and subsequently re-articulated by 15th Century humanists in Florence (Hall, 1996: 319). Ficino's reading of the two Venuses is in strong contrast with the earlier interpretations of Baccaccio (more than a hundred years before) who believed *Venus Coelestis* to be equivalent to carnality and immorality and beset with 'the sexual sin' of a salacious existence that is symbolised by the nudity of Venus (Rubin, 2000: 30). Marsilio Ficino conversely understood both incarnations of Venus to be laudable: 'each love is virtuous and praiseworthy for each follows a divine image'. The Heavenly/*Coelestis Venus* being 'that intellect... located in the angelic mind... entranced by an innate love for understanding God' and significantly the Earthly/*Vulgaris Venus* - 'the power of procreation attributed to the World Soul... her love for procreating that same beauty in bodies' (Rubin, 2000: 30).

This is what I consider to be the impetus behind the conception of Venus in Titian's *Sacred and Profane Love* (Figure 5). Here the two Renaissance beauties reveal the above-mentioned dual aspects of the goddess of love. *Venus Coelestis* represents the purity of the soul. Here the naked figure is directly associated with goodness of spirit (Tinagli, 1997: 122). The flaming urn she carries indicates celestial passion (Hall, 1996: 319). Earthly/*Vulgaris Venus* is clothed in a somewhat unadorned gown, considering the period, and presents the





Figure 5. Titian. 1514. *Sacred and Profane Love*. (Tinagli, 1997: 122).

splendour located in the earthly realm and that of sexual reproduction (Hall, 1996: 319). This example illustrates the shift in meaning of the twin Venuses that are iconographically portrayed beyond reprimand with both types of love and beauty seen as acceptable and praiseworthy.

The Italian High Renaissance was, however, only one example in the reception of Venus and female beauty during the Renaissance. While its influence was profound regarding the attitude towards female beauty and the ideal body's representation in art, the northern countries exhibited a distinct apprehensiveness in relation to the nude and matters of sensual love and the erotic. In the northern parts of Europe, the Medieval anxiety pertaining to morality and the suspicion of female beauty and sexuality persisted to a far greater extent (Grössinger, 1997: 15, xiii).<sup>6</sup> The moral engrossment of the Middle Ages and the later Counter-Reformation (Mullins, 1985: 20-21) thus cannot be discounted in gaining a full appreciation of the Venus and the ideal sexualised beauty. Iconographic attributes re-inscribed with Christian

reasoning were instrumental in ascribing moralising and didactic meanings to mythological Venus. Attributes associated with Venus since antiquity include the mirror (Hall, 1996: 211), as well as others such as the apple, the rose and doves (Impelluso, 2002: 240). Pictorially these attributes were freely interchanged with mortal women and other mythological figures. The converse also takes place, as the Venus figure is represented with new and unfamiliar iconography. In the 1531 emblem, *Venus and the Tortoise* (Figure 6), Venus is juxtaposed with a new symbol, a tortoise. A moralising meaning is imparted by the figure of beauty and sexuality to the mortal woman. Pointing towards



Figure 6. Artist Unknown. 1531. *Venus and the Tortoise*. (Seznec, 1972: 115).

<sup>6</sup> Christa Grössinger, in *Picturing Women in Late Medieval and Renaissance Art*, (1997: xiii), questions whether this is due to the waning of Catholicism in favour of Reformation antism that swept through northern Europe during the early Renaissance. Here women were subsequently becoming "less independent" as patriarchal domination increased.

the tortoise, which she steps on, the emblem instructs that women must be vigilant of what they utter and remain at home, faithful to their spouses (Seznec, 1972: 101). The apple in her hand reinforces this, as it is reminiscent of both the biblical Eve and her temptation of Adam that leads to the expulsion from paradise (Hall, 1996: 5), and the golden apple of Paris that would eventually bring about the destruction of Troy.

Old attributes would also be re-inscribed with new meaning to fit an agenda of moral and religious instruction. This can be perceived in relation to doves, that accompanied Venus since ancient times as symbols of passion and loyalty (Hall, 1996: 109). Through Christian intervention these become conveyers pertaining to curbing lusts, with St Basil intoning: "Let women imitate the turtle dove, keeping their marriage vows sacred" (Biedermann, 1992: 101). This re-inscription of meaning is also seen in the case with the mirror of beauty, attributed to Venus since antiquity. It is reinterpreted for Christian rhetoric and she is handed the Christian mirror of conceit (*superbia*) and carnality (*luxuria*) (Shefer, 1998: 602). As Wittkower remarks:

In the free adaptation of ancient mythological figures the artists of the Renaissance did not confine themselves to attributing new meanings to fixed types. If occasion required, they freely combined elements from different sources. (Wittkower, 1977: 139)

In this manner new devices were added and existing ones reinterpreted. Christianity imbued Venus with new nuances of duplicity. This phenomenon added new inconsistencies to grow out of female bodies of beauty and sexuality.

The celebratory perceptions of Venus during the Italian High Renaissance were hence as unfixed as the paintings themselves. The artists, as subject to the requirements of their patrons, were as adaptable on both counts. The mutability of the body of Venus as a bearer of multiple and conflicting meaning in relation to dominant cultural

and religious ideologies becomes apparent with another example of Titian's work. Now known as *Religion Succoured by Spain*, this work was first commissioned by Duke Alfonso I d'Este around 1516 and remained unfinished at the time of his death in 1534. It is then transformed, both visually and ideologically, approximately four decades thereafter for a new patron, Philip II and a new age of Counter-Reformation (Wittkower, 1977: 144, 145).

Wittkower's study on *Religion Succoured by Spain*, calls upon the investigation of this work's paintbrush technique by MacLaren, which bears witness to the presence of a previous theme (Wittkower, 1977: 144). This theme is that of a myth-based allegory – a harmonious meeting of the two main protagonists (and opposites) Minerva and Venus/*Castitas* and *Voluptas* – in accord with the humanist perception of chastity and sexual love. This mythological topic would, however, make way for a religious reinterpretation (Wittkower, 1977: 146). By Titian's small modifications Venus is transformed into a repentant Mary Magdalene, as a depiction of 'Sin redeemed by Faith' (Wittkower, 1977: 145). Wittkower explains how putting a cross beside her and adding a rock for her to rest on this change is facilitated iconographically. Aspects of nature further inform her with new meaning – a withered tree behind her acts as the biblical *Tree of Knowledge*, and curled around it is not one, but seven serpents that represent the seven deadly sins and the seven demons that Christ expelled from her according to the Bible (Wittkower, 1977: 145). Minerva is fitted with a banner on her spear that transforms her into a symbol of the victorious Protestant religion and the Virgin (Wittkower, 1977: 144, 145). This work bears witness to the mutability of Venus and her vast potential as an allegorical subject that could be reinterpreted and reinscribed to exhibit cultural and religious ideologies.

### **Venus and Aspects of Dutch 17th Century Art**

The styles and methods exhibited by Renaissance art would eventually extend and develop into the Mannerist movement, but as Eco asserts 'much of



the Renaissance period – from the death of Raphael in 1520, if not before that – was Mannerist' (Eco, 2004: 214, 222). This stylistic change would simultaneously intensify and surpass Renaissance pursuits (Eco, 2004: 222) as artists sought new ways to outdo the accuracy of 'convincing illustration' achieved in 16th Century Italy (Gombrich, 1968: 156). This stylistic change would reflect the changing perceptions of physical beauty. Venus and the ideal body of beauty became visually lengthened as the strict conventions of Renaissance proportion were discarded, but the ideal of fluidity was maintained and enlarged upon (Eco, 2004: 220). Ideal beauty remained lustrous, pale skinned and seamless like the Venus's of Titian and Veronese (Hollander, 1993: 104). Pictorial beauties displayed petite heads and tiny feet at the outstretches of their extended figures (Hollander, 1993: 104).

In the Netherlands (particularly the north), the closing stages of the 16th Century saw a marked increase in the appeal of mythology as a theme in artistic production, with artists turning to authors of antiquity such as Ovid as a source of inspiration (Sluijter, 2000: 23). Venus became a popular subject of paintings and engravings. Aspects of Dutch 17th Century art, comparable to the Middle Ages, once again became preoccupied with the moral implications of physical beauty (Sluijter, 2000: 140). There existed a pronounced anxiety with regard to Venus and beautiful women as temptresses of the 'eye' (Sluijter, 2000: 121). Indeed this distrust of beauty and the vision that enables it would also

urge the artist and male viewer to deny the sinful enjoyment of beauty and sensuality (Sluijter, 2000: 140). Venus became a key figure in this pursuit as the inscription for the *frontispiece* of 1622 *Aendachtig liedt-boeck* (Figure 7) underlines:

Contemplating one's vanity with grief,  
And humbly lending an ear to holy teachings of Virtue  
One dismisses Venus, and treads under foot the world's  
splendour and gratefully offers God the incense of  
conversion. (Sluijter, 2000: 140)

In this particular didactic context Venus, as an agent of enticement, vanity and beauty, becomes morally hazardous and the 'universal foolish mother of all vanities' (Sluijter, 2000: 140) ironically calling the painter not to fall prey to the beauties of Venus, while he represents her as such.

In Figure 7 we observe the artist humbly stooping down before a religious altar, turning his back on his canvas as Venus and Cupid make a dash for the door (Sluijter, 2000: 140). This illustrates how Venus is perceived as directly in contrast to the spiritual order of the time, which was highly suspicious of beauty as corrupting and transgressive (Goodman, 1998: 324). This would, however, not quell the artist's rendition of female beauty. Instead morality could be seen as a guise under which to portray it. So, while Venus and the erotic qualities of beauty were denounced and moralised as a sight of sinful temptation, it would consistently be represented. Again, Venus and images of beauty emulated the ideal of the time, such as smooth pale skin, small breasts and a voluptuously elongated body. This created a site/sight of desire and voyeuristic titillation for the male artist and viewer – a naughty fantasy, while simultaneously thwarting women's access to pleasure through moral instruction and social sanction.

Views on the moral preoccupation of the time and the dangers associated with observing the beauty and sexuality of Venus can be traced according to the readings of Justus Hofstede on Hendrick



Figure 7. Pieter Serwouters, 1622. *Aendachtig liedt-boeck* (frontispiece). (Sluijter, 2000: 123).

Goltzius' *Allegory of Visus and the Art of Painting* (Figure 8). According to Hofstede almost all the iconographical elements and themes of the work – Venus, the looking glass, the cat, the pearls that ornament Venus – suggest associations of moral corruption – carnal desire, avarice and foolishness (Sluijter, 2000: 89).



Figure 8. Jan Saenredam (after Hendrick Goltzius). Circa 1598–1601. *Allegory of Visus and the Art of Painting*. (Sluijter, 2000: 88).



Figure 9. Jacob de Baker. Circa 1550. *Visus*. (Sluijter, 2000: 93).

In the 20th Century these types of representations of women certainly influenced the conditions that saw the negation of the Venus figure as a site of potential pleasure, especially for the woman. In its extreme it even questioned the validity of regarding visual manifestations of female beauty in its entirety. The feminist movement raised many questions about the male representations of women, critiquing male artists' images of women's physical beauty, such as Venus. They were seen as vehicles of patriarchal domination, produced as sights of pleasure geared solely towards men. Nanette Solomon would critique male artists' representation of the female nude as defenceless and imbued with sexuality as a 'site of, and the public display of the heterosexual desire the medium for, a male bonding ritual' (Solomon, 1991: 335). In light of feminist critique, beauty became equated with inequality, phallocentric control and shame for many women. Feminism rejected 'the temptation to be a beautiful object' (Densmore [1969] in Steiner, 2001: xv, 126). These negative associations of beauty placed Venus in a precarious position. As Laura Mulvey states in her seminal article of 1975 *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, on her belief that women are represented as passive objects for male scopophilic pleasure "It is said that analysing pleasure, or beauty, destroys it. That is the intention of this article." (Jones, 1993: 392).

The issues of scopophilia and voyeuristic fantasy are valid and instructive as they can critique the objectification of the idealised body of beauty for the exclusive pleasure of the male viewer and emphasise the problematic status of the ideal. They also often negate beauty as an avenue of potential pleasure for the woman. In fact Amelia Jones negates as 'antifeminist' the 'Feminist anti-fetishism' or 'puritanism of the eye' where visual enticement is believed to be inevitably compliant with 'male fetishism' and women's pleasure becomes disregarded and overlooked (Jones, 1993: 394). While Wendy Steiner states:

One way or the other, female freedom and self-realisation would seem to require resistance to such aesthetics. But eschewing beauty comes at a high price if it closes off passion, procreation and self-understanding. For many women, beauty appears to set freedom and pleasure at odds. (Steiner, 2001: xviii)

This section has attempted to highlight some of the attitudes, perceptions and representations of Venus and the idealised female body in order to convey the shifting characteristics and conflicting values associated with exterior physical beauty at different historical moments. The next section will trace aspects of the woman's relationship to the mirror during the periods under discussion. The mirror, often functioning as an iconographic device, would reflect both physical beauty and the ideological concerns of these particular times.

## 1.2 the mirror

The mirror, 'matrix of the symbolic,' accompanies the human quest for identity. (Melchior-Bonnet, 2002: 4)

The mirror asks and induces us to look and to perceive. As Brenda Schmahmann asserts in *Through the Looking Glass* 'mirrors invite the act of looking' (Schmahmann, 2004: 6), hence it urges investigation and examination as it empowers us to observe ourselves beyond that of the gaze of the other (Melchior-Bonnet, 2002: 2). Simultaneously gazing in the mirror has traditionally been condemned through the social shame attached to this activity (Melchior-Bonnet, 2002: 157). Reflection creates a double, and the meaning attached to this reflection – control, mastery, affirmation, pleasure, and so on – may be highly divergent in nature. However, the mirror remains an intimate connection between the woman and her appearance (Hollander, 1993: 391) and hence also her personal identity.

Woman awakens to life when she has access to her image. (Melchior-Bonnet, 2002: 213)

Looking in the mirror is inextricably bound up with women's self-image and has been underlined as instrumental in the development of female identity formation. As Frost mentions in *Doing Looks: Women, Appearance and Mental Health* (1999) when Sophie, the protagonist of *Sophie's World* (Gaarder, 1995), considers "Who am I?", she turns to the mirror to find an explanation of self before all else (Frost, 1999: 123). Lacan (1949) expresses the importance of the mirror in the 'developing function of the I', with his aptly named 'Mirror phase' (Melchior-Bonnet, 2002: 4). It is during this phase that the child, confronted by the reflection in a mirror, starts to conceive of him or herself as a coherent whole rather than simply fragmented parts lacking the demarcations between inside and outside.



between self and (m)other. It is now too that the child finds enjoyment in this sight of self, while concurrently realising the difference between the mirror image and that of him or herself, "I am the other of that other" (Melchior-Bonnet, 2002: 5). "To become a subject, or social being, the infant must come to terms with the reflection not being identical to itself as subject." (Uncredited author in The European Graduate School, 2005: 1) For women the experience of the mirror phase is, however, far more complex and perplexing. Luce Irigaray draws attention to this in her critique of Lacan's theory, interposing the difficulties pertaining to the girl in this process as being confronted with 'many more mirror images of herself in the object case than in the subject case' (Feratova-Loidolt, 2005: 2). This is based on the belief that the woman only encounters 'images/representations that are not of her own making'. Furthermore this can lead to a condition that cannot enable a joyful adoption, but necessitates either the compliance to identities of phallogentric lack or a negation of these leading to pathology (Feratova-Loidolt, 2005: 2).

The tension in relation to beauty, its cultural and historical interpretation and the real woman can be well articulated through the symbolic mirror. Art historically the use of the mirror became an important iconographic symbol, as its reflection of exterior physicality would act as an important device in the assigning of internal value. Hence it would be instrumental in both the negation of physical beauty, as in the Middle Ages and Dutch 17th Century art, and its celebration as in the Italian High Renaissance. This section will discuss this phenomenon and the continuing significance of the mirror and its implication of vanity, which is still perceptible as 'it is made into a fact of their (women's) nature, a defining principle of their identity' (Leppert, 1996: 244). Up to the present day the mirror persists in being 'the privileged and vulnerable site of femininity' (Melchior-Bonnet, 2002: 271).



Figure 10. Artist Unknown. Circa 1400. *Venus-Luxuria*. (Seznec, 1972: 107).

### The Moralising Mirror

During the Middle Ages the mirror was seen as an object of mystery and an expensive rarity in everyday life (Melchior-Bonnet, 2002: 14–20). Owing to the difficulty in making mirrors, it was often orb-like in shape, as the technique for producing large, smooth mirror surfaces had not yet been perfected. The mirror's surface was often clouded, uneven and tinged with irregular hints of colour (Melchior-Bonnet, 2002: 13). The truthfulness and trustworthiness of the mirror's reflection was constantly being questioned. As a symbol in art, as in other spheres, the mirror and its reflection had from its inception been viewed as 'ambivalent' in nature (Cirlot, 1995: 211). This is also the case during the Middle Ages as in symbolic meaning, the mirror and its reflection 'rebounded between (1) a mechanism of introversion and self-contemplation in order to emulate a semblance of God, and conversely that of (2) an instrument of deception and falsehood, an emblem of sin and the devil' (Melchior-Bonnet, 2002: 108, 187). Thus Christian doctrine instructed that the only wholesome mirror was that of the divine – that encouraged spiritual pursuits that excluded the exterior being. Any other uses of the mirror were consequently furiously and frequently

denounced as promoting lust and vanity through the mirror's illusory surface (Melchior-Bonnet, 2002: 108, 187). The mirror, while literally reflecting the exterior, simultaneously acted as a figurative barometer of the inner moral character.



Figure 11. Hans Brosamer. Circa 1530. *A Whore Venerated by a Fool*. (Grössinger, 1997: 128).

Gazing into the mirror is a pursuit that is traditionally affiliated and related to women (Shefer, 1998: 602).<sup>7</sup> Eve, as the carnally tempting beauty, was frequently represented with a mirror from the 13th Century (Melchior-Bonnet, 2002: 200). Salaciousness, along with vanity, functioned as the 'metaphorical daughters of Eve' and became synonymous with mirrors (Melchior-Bonnet, 2002: 200). The correlation of sin with Eve and her daughters and their subsequent classification as sinful seductresses, and vain ones at that, resulted from readings of *The Temptation* along with *The Fall of Man*. (Here we can also retrace the story of Pandora.) It was particularly the 4th and 5th Century clergy from the early Church that brought about the perception of women as seductresses (Grössinger, 1997: 1). The mythological Venus with the mirror, (one of her symbols since antiquity) traditionally nude and affiliated with beauty and

erotic love, was a perfect figure to be subsumed into this moralising doctrine. Pictorial portrayals of immorality, enticement and vanity that the Christian church habitually related to the woman would feature Venus, Eve and the mortal woman. One of the key iconographical devices that linked and bound Venus, Eve and the mortal woman to this didactic ideology was the mirror.

This would influence the relationship between women and the mirror for centuries to come.



Figure 12. Sebastian Brandt, 1494. *Untitled (from Ship of Fools)* (Melchior-Bonnet, 2002: 210).

Women of this period were censured through the mirror as vessels of these qualities. It was generally alleged that women were more easily enticed by supposedly false impressions of the eyes and the mirror was used to underline this belief (Melchior-Bonnet, 2002: 200). A woodcut from 1494 (Figure 12) illustrates this. The woman gazes at her face in the mirror, but beyond the surface lies the devil brandishing the mirror for the woman, while the other demon behind her looks ready to seize her. Women's engagement with acts of beautification of themselves was often perceived as an attempt to catch the male in a snare of base physicality that threatened their spiritual endeavours (Melchior-Bonnet, 2002: 204). In line with this conception, Melchior-Bonnet quotes the German Protestant moralist Johann Argricola (1494–1566):

Women never act except under the influence of the mirror....  
They have no greater joy than that of adorning themselves. This is why they have a counselor named

<sup>7</sup> Even in Ancient Greece most mirrors had handgrips resembling the female's body (Shefer, 1998: 602). But significantly during antiquity both men and women were ridiculed for their love of mirrors (Melchior-Bonnet, 2002: 11) and it is worth mentioning that Narcissus, Ovid's (Roman, 43 BC – AD 17) most renowned mirror gazer was male (Melchior-Bonnet, 2002: 106).



mirror who teaches them to adjust their veils, to whitewash their mugs, to look at themselves frontwards and sideways, to turn their heads, to laugh and to banter, to walk and to sit still. (Melchior-Bonnet, 2002: 204)

The cultivation of beauty and its alignment with sin, the devil and carnal lust is also illustrated in Figure 13. This also attests to the prevalence of this



Figure 13. Artist Unknown. Circa 1498. *Demon and Frivolous Woman*. (Rachleff, 1990: 85).



Figure 14. Anton Woensam. Circa 1552, *The Wise Woman*. (Grössinger, 1997: 44).

theme in the Renaissance. (The act of looking at oneself had to be done with unpretentiousness and timidity so as not to incur the sins of vanity [Melchior-Bonnet, 2002: 158]). Here the woman's reflection has, however, been replaced by the devil/demon's posterior, pertaining to the idea that she perceives her own image and beauty fallaciously (Hollander, 1993: 394).

In Figure 14 the representation of the good woman is riddled with iconographical signifiers to render her so. Her mouth sealed with a lock, and the dove that rests on her chest suggests that she will remain true to her husband. The snake twisted around her waist also acts as a sign of female silence and instructs that she should only speak to her spouse (Grössinger, 1997: 43). In the mirror she brandishes (which she does not look at), resides the reflection available to the good woman – the crucified Christ.

Besides heralding the sins of vanity and lust, the mirror also acted as a form of *memento mori*. As such the mirror acted as reminder of the temporality of exterior female beauty and the temporary nature of earthly existence, a theme particularly popular in the northern regions of Europe (Melchior-Bonnet, 2002: 209). Themes relating to vanity and death can be seen in Hans



Figure 15. Hans Baldung Grien. Circa 1510. *The Three Stages of Life, with Death*. (Hagen, 1996: 37).

Baldung Grien's *Death and the Woman* (1517) and *The Three Stages of Life with Death* (1510), Hans Brosamer's *A Whore Venerated by a Fool* (1530) and Hans Schwarz's *Death and the Maiden* (1520).

Northerner Hans Baldung Griens' Renaissance-based work of 1510 (Figure 15) makes reference to this relationship between beauty, the women, the mirror and death. The identity of the central figure painted according to strictures of the ideal of the time – milky white skin and long golden hair – has baffled art historians. In this sense the title of this work has often been changed and has been called *Beauty and Death*, *Allegory of Transience*, *Allegory of the Vanity of all Worldly Things*, *Death and The Three Ages of Woman* (Hagen, 1996: 36, 39). The figure of beauty holding the mirror has been considered with uncertainty questioned to be Eve, Venus, an allegory of vanity or a prostitute (Hagen, 1996: 36, 41). This attests to the mutable nature of these identities when beauty is aligned with the mirror. Only the religious mirror held by the unadulterated Virgin body could circumvent these associations of the looking glass – as in the *Speculum sine macula* – where an unblemished mirror radiates a reflection of God's righteousness or the Virgin's spiritual beauty (Hall, 1996: 327).



Figure 16. Artist Unknown. 15th Century. *The Garden of Nature (detail)* (Lucie-Smith, 1991: 40).



Figure 17. Hans Memling. 1485. *Vanity*. (Mullins, 1985: 63).

The 15th Century artwork *The Garden of Nature with Venus, Juno and Pallas* (Figure 16), (Lucie-Smith, 1991: 38) shows the mythological Venus recontextualised into the then contemporary environment. The now allegorically subsumed Venus is gazing at herself in the mirror.

Compare this to Memling's unidentified beauty holding a mirror, entitled *Vanity* (Figure 17) from the same period. The similarities in stance and physical appearance are evident. As an allegory of vanity with her mirror, much like Hans Baldung Grien's example (Figure 15), her identity becomes questionable. Is she an anonymous woman, a depraved whore, or an incarnation of Venus? As all these representations exhibit the idealised characteristics of female beauty of this time, and through the mirror are subsumed into a moralising allegory of vanity, the identity of this woman becomes ambiguous.



The mirror therefore equated the woman's appreciation of her own beauty to spiritual transgression. Accompanied by the mirror, the woman's exterior physicality became representative of her inner being. While she might be rendered pictorially as a portrayal of all that was fashionable beauty at the time, her recognition of her own beauty and experiencing beauty in a sensual manner, deemed the woman a malefactor of vanity. We are thus confronted by a situation that sees Eve, Venus and a beautiful woman become interchangeable as their beauty and the mirror equate them with sin, vanity and luxuria. In visual representations they are habitually portrayed as vessels of these conceptions — their identity explicitly linked and shaped by social and cultural practices and institutions. In this manner the representation of beauty combined with iconographical devices created objects of desire for the male that were morally sanctionable through simultaneous moral derision of female sexuality — pleasure versus punishment, beauty versus death. As Richardt Leppart in *Art and the Committed Eye* (1996: 216) states: "The pleasure of the painted nude is driven in part by the act of looking in judgement on evil personified." Erotic visual titillation became available under the auspices of condemnation, as behind the moral lay a beautiful, sexually virile woman.

It is not possible to deny the underlying subtle coding of gender and sexuality in these representations that have persisted in the imagining of women to the present day. For men perhaps the fetishisation of sin, a tantalizing terror, while for women the ideal of beauty becomes a very definite gender position that negates the enjoyment and appreciation of exterior beauty as morally corrupt. Experiencing pleasure in female beauty became bound to the structuring of sexual difference. Here one can pick up the beginnings of that which brought about the derision of the feminist movement in the early 1970s. Feminism was imperative in raising questions that related to images of beautiful, sexualised women as vehicles

of patriarchal domination. Images such as these were believed to privilege 'the masculine view' (Deepwell, 1995: 7) as sights of beauty produced solely for the pleasure of male viewers. Criticisms launched against the traditional representations of female beauty and the mirror included that, with the woman's attention habitually portrayed as caught within the frame of the mirror, she became even more available as an objectified 'sight' for voyeuristic fantasy and that the woman with the mirror was exclusively portrayed for the enjoyment of the male gaze (Shefer, 1998: 602–603) (Hollander, 1993: 396).

The morally disapproving relationship to beauty and the mirror, as seen through the artists chosen to exemplify it, was particularly prevalent in the northern European and Germanic countries with their highly moralistic agenda that would prevail well beyond the Middle Ages (Grossinger, 1997: 15, xiii). As Sluijter in *Seductress of Sight* relays:

...for the northerner the Superbia/Vanitas connotations embedded in the motif of the mirror will always have been inherent to the content (of an artwork). (Sluijter, 2000: 117)

The Italian Renaissance would, however, open a new relationship between the mirror and renditions of female beauty...

#### **The Venerated Mirror — aspects of the Italian Renaissance looking glass**



Figure 18. Titian, 1518–19. *Worship of Venus*. (Beck, 1999: 396).



As I have discussed previously in relation to Venus (in Section 1.1) the Italian High Renaissance, influenced by humanist philosophy, was a period during which the idealised female body and moral condemnation of it were briefly separated, disclosing a rather thought-provoking and alternative view of 'Medieval' Venus and as such the relationship to female beauty (Marwick, 1988: 71). This would facilitate an alternative relationship between the mirror and the woman. The moralising mirror of the Middle Ages and northern Europe lost its religious fervour (Melchior-Bonnet, 2002: 213). Indeed the 'power' of beauty and the enchantress with the mirror were happily lamented. Women were even encouraged to find beauty in the looking glass beyond religiously and socially-imposed guilt and shame. So the Italian poet Giambattista Marino (1569 – 1625) intones:

Let only the beautiful face  
Be your mirror and our heaven  
Because it attracts to itself such light  
That your mirror looks at itself in it  
And for the mirror itself is the mirror. (Marino in  
Melchior-Bonnet, 2002: 213)

Indeed the woman and mirror together functioned as a celebrated site of beauty suggesting the revered and godly. Often the mortal would lose her identity to become a 'Venus' as the aspiration lay within the otherworldly (Melchior-Bonnet, 2002: 213). In this context the mirror functioned as a symbol of 'feminine beauty and love' (Sluiter, 2000: 117).

In Bellini's 1515 work above (*Young Woman at Her Toilet*) no symbolic or sermonising message denies the Venus-like figure her enjoyment of beauty (Goodman, 1998: 323). In the literature that surrounded Lorenzo the Magnificent's court, Marcilio Ficino and poets like Luigi Pulci and Angelo Poliziano venerated women's beauty as bodily proof of divine excellence, with the physical being believed to be the 'mirror of the soul' (Tinagli, 1997: 73).



Figure 19. Titian  
Circa 1515. *The  
Woman at Her  
Toilet*. (Olga's  
Gallery, 2006: 1)

This phenomenon suggests a relationship of enjoyment and intimacy between the woman and the mirror that can be seen as reflected in the pursuits of painting at this time. Painting sought to represent, as in portraiture, a replication as true to nature and reality as possible. At a time when distance often meant absence, portraits and paintings often functioned as replacements and replicas of real lovers and loved ones (Tinagli, 1997: 85). Visual representation often sought the possibility of a 'relationship' between subject and viewer based on sight and sentient acknowledgement (Tinagli, 1997: 4). This had a significant bearing on the development from side-on portraits to that of forward-facing subjects, with the visual relationship between the subject and the viewer being brought eye-to-eye, allowing for an 'exchange of glances' (Tinagli, 1997: 86). This has bearing on the typically small-scale mirror of this period that often acted like a diminutive portrait within painted works, which mostly reflected only the face (Hollander, 1993: 396). They therefore captured beauties' faces, not for moralising, but for intimacy with the viewer. It can be argued that this state also bears influence on Venus, with the importance of a subject/viewer interaction being underscored at this time. Patricia Rubin alerts us to a particular visual relationship that was sought with regard to pictorial portrayals of Venus figures that negates

the viewing of beauty as negative and demeaning. Neo-platonic thoughts on love and female beauty were highly reliant on the act of vision that was not negated. "Love was kindled through the eyes: through the power of the eyes of the beautiful lady and through the intense gazing (*miro fiso*) of the lover" (Rubin, 2000: 37). The experience of beauty was thus based on a powerful interchange between two parties. This subject-object interchange could be extended to pictorial representations of female beauty. We can compare this to the Medieval Venus, where the relationship is firstly and necessarily morally didactic in nature, an ideological communication that negates sanctioned appreciation and pleasure for women. In this sense it can be argued that her gaze can find no exchange of appreciation; it can only be scorned at or secretly coveted. In contrast the 'High Renaissance' female beauty from Florence is constructed as very differently as a 'type of viewing object'. Instead she affects the viewer as 'her beauty provokes a gaze which inspires the desire for love' (Rubin, 2000: 37). The purpose of this love is not merely carnal desire, but an elevating 'spiritual' experience (Rubin, 2000: 37). This interchange is facilitated by a receptive and fixed look of the pictorial Venus that engages her viewer, alerting us to the potential of neo-platonically influenced viewership that existed at this time (Rubin, 2000: 37).

### **The Troubled Mirror — Aspects of the Dutch Mirror of the 17th Century**

Mannerism, with its fondness for distortion, would destabilise the mirror as male artists like Parmigiano would warp his own features in the looking glass (Melchior-Bonnet, 2004: 226). This sense of uneasiness and disturbance (Eco, 2004: 216) relaying the 'unstable condition of being' (Hollander, 1993: 194) pervasive at this time, could be seen as echoed in the mirror of female beauty. Beyond the Renaissance ideal of celebrating beauty clergy persisted in denouncing its potential for vanity "Those who minister to vainglory and to appearance with the aid of a mirror fuel a malady

of the soul" (Melchior-Bonnet, 2004: 215). The eminent 17th Century clergyman, Francois Senault, would intone that 'self-love is nothing other than lust' (Melchior-Bonnet, 2004: 216). This theme of the woman, whether in the guise of Venus or her sister seductresses gazing into the reflective surface of the mirror, suggesting their vanity, remains a fixture in art until the first decade of the 20th Century (Shefer, 1998: 606).

Disparaging vanity, so synonymous with mirrors, reflection and femaleness, particularly before the celebration of the Renaissance ideals, emerges again, particularly in Dutch 17th Century art (Becker, 1994: 101). Severe Protestant ideology saw most of the pictorial portrayals of women's beauty and women engaged with practices of beauty morally condemned for the 'lust/love' that it supposedly inspired (Goodman, 1998: 323).

The combination of the Venus or woman and the moralising mirror of vanity became a well-worn device as the attractive woman with her mirror which 'whether she is called so or not, seems always to be an image of Venus, in a dangerous aspect', the treacherous temptress returning (Hollander, 1993: 400). A beauty and a mirror once again became a negative personification of vanity. Jan Gossaert was the earliest Dutch artist to integrate references to Venus with portrayals of unclothed women with the mirror, hence aligning them with concepts of *Superbia* and *Vanitas*. This relationship was extended and elaborated on by many more artists until the pictorial distinctions concerning Venus and the then current temptresses grew progressively more obscure (Sluiter, 2000: 116).

Vanity or '*vanitas*' was understood as a sin and weakness suggestive of the Bible's admonition in Ecclesiastics 1 verse 2 '*omnia vanitas*' — all is vanity (De Girolami Cheney, 1998: 883). Dutch 17th Century art is beleaguered with *vanitas* symbols. These act as visual clues that relayed religious warnings against vanity acting as pictorial 'reminders' of the



transitory nature of life and the flesh. Flowers, butterflies, shells, hourglasses, skulls and many more symbols fed into this preoccupation (De Girolami Cheney, 1998: 884). As a *vanitas* symbol the mirror teamed up with Venus or the mortal women would act as a didactic iconographic device that underlined the relationship of beauty and death in particular with regard to Dutch 'Venuses' (Hollander, 1993: 400).



Figure 20. Jan Miense Molenaar. 1663. *Women at her Toilet* – *Lady World*. (Gerten-Jackson, 1996: 1).

These preoccupations are exemplified by Jan Miense Molenaar's *Women at her Toilet* also known as *Lady World* (Figure 20). The mortal woman is surrounded by symbols that relay notions of mortality and corruption which stands in sharp contrast to her physical beauty. Her ring suggests arrogance, the human skull symbolises ever-present death, the monkey by her side announces carnal desire, while the map behind the woman acts as a symbol for 'Lady World' as the epitome of worldly transgression and carnal desire (Goodman, 1998: 325). Almost every object in the painting denounces woman's preoccupation with physical beauty and relays its potential for spiritual ruin of the soul. Central in the image is the ornate mirror held in the woman's hands, conveying suggestions of arrogance and the deceitfulness of the exterior beauty. These visual

warnings and suggestions of the woman's vanity would persist during the 17th Century, as the beautiful woman and the mirror remained an embodiment of vanity that denounced physical beauty as a valid pleasure (Goodman, 1998: 324–5). It was with the help of didactic adages and motifs found in emblem books, seeking to encourage morality and spurn vice (De Girolami Cheney, 1998: 884) that artists from the Golden Age of Dutch painting, informed by Protestantism, represented beautiful women and the looking glass as sinful and immoral (Goodman, 1998: 324). Goodman draws attention to this by the following examples of the artists' portrayal of woman and the mirror as:

a wanton courtesan (Ceasar van Everdingen, *Michel Sweets*, Jan Steen), a vessel of vanity (Paulus Moreelse, *Terboch*, *Girl in Front of a Mirror*, Frans van Meiris, *A Young Woman Standing Before a Mirror*) and a cunning temptress (Gabriel Metsu, *Hunter's Gift*, Frans Meiris, *The Puppy*). (Goodman, 1998: 324)

Even today the censure of women's enjoyment of their physical appearance in relation to 'self-love' and 'self-appreciation' still exists under the same disapproving term of vanity along with the psychological addition of narcissism (Frost, 1990: 127). As Frost states: "Vanity is unacceptable" (Frost, 1990: 128). More recently the pervasively negative associations attributed to women's involvement with and pursuit of physical beauty can be ascribed to the belief in its deviation from the male norm, the medical 'pathologisation' of activities associated with pursuit of beauty as well as elements of feminist theory that perceive this preoccupation as inconsequential and evidence of a woman's compliance to patriarchal values (Frost, 1999: 117).

The notion of women's vanity as an abnormality can be underlined by its perceived difference from the (male) norm. In the *Broverman* study of the early 1970s, mental health practitioners listed attributes that reflected a 'normal man', 'normal woman' and in overview a 'normal adult'. The attributes ascribed to the 'normal man' coincided

with those recognised as appropriate to the 'normal adult'. However, the attributes ascribed to the 'normal woman', which included attentiveness to beauty and physical appearance, were considered as abnormal regarding attributes of the well-adjusted 'normal adult' (Freedman, 1986: 17-18). Hollander expands on this in relation to the mirror 'the restless ghost of centuries past' as:

We are still ashamed of our self-regarding impulses, our desire to see ourselves face-to-face as pictures, and to acknowledge that we inwardly see ourselves that way. We are afraid that psychic harm and social censure, if not spiritual damnation, may arise from too much study of the mirror. (Hollander, 1993: 415)

In relation to personality disorder it is narcissism in particular that seems to be at stake in relation to the mirror. At an elementary level narcissism can be defined as the overt and inordinate pleasure in one's own image, as well as the failure to separate the self from this image. Narcissism principally operates via the eyes (Welchman, 2001: 188) and is intimately linked to the mirror. In Freudian terms this process is identified as a phenomenon that allows for a separation of the subject to harness the ego as a 'love object' and hence allowing the binary opposites of subject and object to exist in the selfsame individual (Frost, 1988: 130). That could be described as a 'doubling of the self' (Frost, 1998: 131). Freud believed narcissism and extreme vanity to be a normal trait of the feminine persona (Freedman, 1986: 107). Narcissism or 'physical vanity' can be seen as a natural reaction to and compensation for the inherent lack of the woman — a male phallus and hence a result of penis envy (Irigaray, 1985: 112). Consequently 'feminine narcissism' in Freudian terms can be seen as contingent on the notion of the woman as intrinsically lacking.

According to feminist Sandra Bartky 'feminine narcissism' functions on the same principle as sexual objectification, which conventionally entails two people — the objectifier and the objectified. But in the case of 'feminine

narcissism', these are consolidated within one person. Bartky believes that "A woman can become a sex object for herself, taking toward her own person the attitude of the man" (Bartky, 1990: 36). According to Beauvoir, this sees the woman take on the male perspective as her own, evaluating herself accordingly (Bartky, 1990: 38). Berger relays a similar understanding when he asserts:

Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. — Thus she turns herself into an object- and most particularly an object of vision: a sight. (Berger, 1974: 46-47)

While Beauvoir believes this to be a normal trait of puberty its persistence into adulthood is regarded as damaging and unbalanced (Frost, 1998: 131). Bartky and others like Simone de Beauvoir have critiqued this state because of the belief that this doubling of self creates an object not derived through women's own agency, but rather an object for and contingent on the male (Bartky, 1990: 38-39).

The negation of narcissism as an avenue for legitimate female pleasure because of its contingency on the identification with the male is similarly seen in relation to images of female beauty. Narcissism can thus also be extended to include identificatory narcissism, where female pleasure can be derived from association with images. For Mulvey in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975) female pleasure is bound to narcissistic identification with images that are seemingly produced for the male or similarly through 'cross identification with the bearer of the look', that is the male (Tickner, 1984: 367). This is a pleasure that Pointon (1992) describes as suspicious as she considers it as denial of the personal individuation of women (Leppert, 1996: 214). Gaining pleasure in regarding the self and images of beauty becomes highly problematic in light of these readings. When accessing beauty and its appreciation become founded on the Freudian premise of lack, and the feminist reading of internalised patriarchy, the double becomes

associated with control, mastery, and inadequacy. Like the moralising mirror of vanity, potential pleasure for the woman becomes suspended.

Despite the negative associations of vanity and narcissism there has, however, developed a tendency that can be described as a more positive attitude towards narcissism. Indeed Frost has questioned Bartky's pessimistic alignment of female narcissism to derision and harm that disregards potential 'narcissistic pleasure'. Interestingly she states that Beauviour and Bartky's approach of dissatisfaction could induce the negation of female pleasure in their appearance above even 'seventeenth-century religious attitudes' (Frost, 1999: 132). Frost suggests that the 'internalised other' is not necessarily bad and can offer legitimate pleasure if substituted with a looking glass of affirmation, a loving partner, and so on (Frost, 1999: 132). Like Frost, Kofman (1987) argues for the liberating qualities of female narcissism that enables women's creative expression as well as a pleasure outlet (Frost, 1999: 130–131). Freedman admits that narcissism can be beneficial as self-love can encourage erotic closeness when enjoyed with others (Freedman, 1986: 111). Joanna Frueh is, however, more adamant about narcissism as a route to pleasure for women. She argues for reconsidering long-established archetypes, like Venus to 'create models of agency' that see women turn themselves into sites of pleasure for themselves and others, an enjoyment of beauty beyond social stigma (Frueh, 2001: 11). For Frueh, Venus represents a multitude of positive personas for the woman – a spouse, a nurturer, and a fervent lover in which the motherly, the erotic and the beautiful intermingle (Frueh, 2001: 128). Stacey (1995) has also underlined the positive attributes of identificatory narcissism for women regarding representations of other women and the mirror. Suggesting that it allows the woman creative agency and enjoyment in a continuing practice of identity construction, the mediation 'between self and other' also includes 'self and imaginary self' (Frost, 1999: 129). Stacey states that the self and the

imaginary self:

...temporarily merges with the fictionalised feminine subject to test out new possibilities. The recognition of a potential self in the fictionalised situation, based on similarity between star and spectator, is operating simultaneously with a desire to maintain the difference between self and ideal. (Stacey in Frost, 1999: 130)

Stacey suggests the relationship to the mirror allows the woman 'to close the gap between her own image and *her* ideal' (Stacey in Frost, 1999: 130). Similarly Melchior-Bonnet (2002: 157) suggests that the mirror, when accessed without guilt and social shame, allows for a creative personal interaction between the viewers and their image, which enables the rebounding of desire between the gazers and their reflection beyond from the eyes of an exterior 'other'.

As art historical representations of idealised beauty and the mirror act as primary subject matter in my practical body of work, this section has sought to provide a context and insight into the relationship between women, beauty and the mirror. As I stated in the introduction, I subscribe to Randolph's (2002: 40) view that by reproducing and recontextualising aspects of an historical artwork, its meaning and understanding will be affected, while some historical implication 'will' still remain inherent. For this reason I find it imperative to define certain understandings and phenomena as done in the previous sections. I have attempted to re-visit the ambiguous relationship between female beauty and the mirror, as pleasure and enjoyment contest the social stigmas of vanity and narcissism still prevalent today (Frost, 1990: 127). As a more relaxed attitude towards narcissism and identificatory narcissism is becoming more discernable in the present day, it allows for a potential avenue of pleasure and appreciation of beauty that has often been denied. The vast scope of this field of study has once again been reduced to themes and readings relevant to my practical work.



8 Mullins draws parallels between the associations of increased 'goodness' and availability when renditions of beautiful women are set in nature and modern advertising where merchandise is often positioned among aspects of nature to promote notions of it being 'clean and good for you' (Mullins, 1985: 124).

9 '...the principal service that is expected from a woman is (the production of) children and the generation of families. The wife is like fecund land, which having received the seed, nourishes and multiplies (it, yielding) abundant and good fruit.' *Vita Cevile* (circa 1400) by Matteo Palmieri (Randolph, 2002: 73).

## 1.3 the garden

The portrayal and reflection of female beauty through the body of Venus and the mirror can also be perceived in nature. The theme and appeal of the woman in nature stretches through Western art and is perceptible even today (Mullins, 1985: 125).<sup>8</sup> Commonly nature is associated with women and this state is seen as historically pervasive (Adams & Gruetzner-Robins, 2000: 2, 5). The correlation between the natural world and women, is well encapsulated by the personifications such as 'Mother Nature', 'Nature herself', and 'Nature the goddess', and is persistent in numerous societies and cultures as a phenomenon that dates back to antiquity (Adams & Gruetzner-Robins, 2000: 2–5).

Women's alignment with nature encourages the belief in beauty as/and fecundity,<sup>9</sup> but concurrently brings about the dislocation from its binary opposite – culture. Confined to nature, the woman, and particularly the nude, becomes 'other' to what is perceived as male-dominated culture. With this in mind, it becomes different, potentially threatening and excluded (Warner, 1985: 324). As Solnit states in *As Eve Said to the Serpent*:

The passive landscape and the supine woman are linked in Western painting as objects for a subject that identifies women with nature and the body, men with culture and the mind. (Solnit, 2001: 45)

This relates to the prevalent occupation of earlier feminist thought, as Barbara Kruger wrote, "We won't play nature to your culture" (Warner, 1985: 325) and Sheri Ortner asserts 'female is to male as Nature is to culture' (Adams & Gruetzner-Robins, 2000: 4). Luce Irigaray believes that the Western convention for male individuation begins with domination of the 'natural' world to enable a disjunction from it, hence 'the subjectivity of man is structured by differentiating himself from mother-nature' (Irigaray, 2004: 68). The males very

formation of self is seen as contingent on the separation from the mother/nature, which deems her 'other' to subsequently be controlled and explained by male culture (Irigaray, 2004: 69). This can be linked to the observations of Raymond Williams who suggests that 'the very idea of landscape implies separation and observation' (Cosgrove & Daniels, 1988: 7).

This makes it clear that nature is in no way an uncomplicated and resolved space of meaning (Adams & Gruetzner-Robins, 2000: 2–3) in relation to the female figure of beauty. Nature is therefore not necessarily neutral and its representation, aligned with the Venus and the idealised body can be seen as a complex site with contesting issues of 'the ideal', the wholesome and the unblemished aligned with the illicit, the untamed and the unknown (Adams & Gruetzner-Robins, 2000: 1). The following section shows some of the ways in which Venus and the woman's idealized body have been portrayed in nature and the contesting themes that occupy this space.

### Aspects of the Garden in the Middle Ages and Renaissance

During the Middle Ages and Renaissance the coupling of Venus and renditions of female beauty with nature are often met in the form of a garden. Gardens at this time were not a frequent phenomenon and when functioning as spaces of leisure and pleasure, beauty was of fundamental importance (Hagen, 1996: 12). It was a site where nature could be contained and structured, where the wild natural environment could be ordered and made subject to art and culture (Hagen, 1996: 65).

One of the garden settings, dating from the Middle Ages, and prevalent in both art and literature in which we find the woman, is the *hortus conclusus*. The *hortus conclusus* was a partitioned garden that enclosed the beautiful woman, removing her from the world outside. As such it excluded the untamed natural world – that

space traditionally beyond 'human' control and hence associated with potentially distressing and treacherous elements (Biedermann, 1992: 140). The *hortus conclusus*, as a kind of terrestrial paradise, predominantly functioned as the setting of the Immaculate Conception (Hall, 1996: 135). The Virgin's garden was traditionally adorned with a profusion of roses (Hall, 1996: 329). Its impenetrability and simultaneous fecundity deemed it a symbol of Mother Mary's virginity (Hall, 1996: 135). It therefore functioned as a site for sacred, non-sexual love. This setting enables a multiple and morally contesting plethora of possibilities, as Venus is introduced to the walled garden in *The Garden of Nature* (an illustration to the text *Les Echees amoureux* [Lucie-Smith, 1991: 34]).



Figure 21.  
Artist  
Unknown.  
15th Century.  
*The Garden  
of Nature*.  
(Lucie-Smith,  
1991: 40).

The visual construction of this image (Figure 21) is suggestive of the role of Venus in this space. This image is composed in such a manner that the two male viewers outside are able to gaze voyeuristically over the confines of the *hortus conclusus* and into its centre (Lucie-Smith, 1991: 34, 35). The one stares pointedly at the bare breasted Venus while the other's dagger, placed upright between his legs, makes a rather prominent phallic statement. The 'sacred' garden

of virginity was thus not beyond erotic fascination, which was arguably facilitated by the site's traditional associations with purity and its simultaneous physical inaccessibility.

The garden was, however, already established as a setting for amorous love, fuelled by written works that set love at the heart of idyllic pastures and glorious gardens. Prime examples are the Medieval *Romance of the Rose* (circa 1230- 1280) (Heilmeyer, 2001: 9, 11) and Boccaccio's *Decameron* (circa 1350). These promote images of love both enjoyed and bemoaned, set in an idyllic space of the garden (Hagen, 1996: 17).



Figure 22. Artist Unknown. Circa 1600. *A Pair of Lovers*.  
(Warnke, 2004: folio 123).

This theme would have longstanding appeal. In the *A Pair of Lovers* (Figure 22) above we find a couple in the garden. The woman holds a sprig of leaves and a violet grows at her feet. The violet is associated with the humbleness of the Virgin Mother and likened to wholesomeness and pure love (Heilmeyer, 2001: 84). The man holds a lute, traditionally a symbol for the woman's physique,<sup>10</sup> the strumming of the strings being suggestive of sexual congress (Grossinger, 1997: 101). Universal fecundity is represented by the ram resting on the fence to the left and conveys the carnal

<sup>10</sup> The lute was an established symbol of the passions of the flesh. It was also known to be displayed by fallen women to indicate their profession (Leppert, 2004: 64).



enthusiasm of the lovers (Wrancke, 2004: folio 123). The inscription that accompanies the image reads as follows:

When the tender sinews are first strengthened  
Like those of an exuberant calf,  
In those years one looks for music, wine and love,  
For the agile age loves the moving grass. (Anonymous in  
Wrancke, 2004: folio 123)

The theme of the garden as a site of love was, however, not static in nature. The subject had undergone transformation towards the end of the 15th Century. Impure associations with the garden became more prevalent. This could be perceived in particular in relation to humorous derision of women's position in the 'Garden of Love' (Grössinger, 1997: 103).

In *The Large Garden of Love* (Figure 23) we see a garden strewn with flowers and a wellspring that



Figure 23. Master E.S. Circa 1460. *The Large Garden of Love*. (Grössinger, 1997: 105).

customarily represents wholesomeness is set in the foreground. But, as Christa Grössinger explains, these signs are misleading. On closer inspection we notice the woman in the front sports horns and the man in front of her, in his fools outfit, is exposing his phallus. 'Lust not love', is the preoccupation in this image and brings sinful immorality into the garden (Grössinger, 1997: 104–106). Robertson (1980) expounding on this states: "The Garden of Love is the garden of Canticum turned upside down for purposes of ironic comedy" (Grössinger, 1997: 106). So, the mortal woman in the garden reveals another side of her nature – her sinful, immoral, luxuriant side. One can relate the above-mentioned phenomenon to the influence of the northern obsession with sin and the woman discussed previously (Grössinger, 1997: xiii). The theme of the sinful woman in the garden was, however, not new. Hence we turn to the biblical Garden of Eden, another garden where nature and the woman were united.



Figure 24. Berthold Furtmeyer, 1481. *Eve and the Virgin in the Garden of Eden*. (Gettings, 1978: 70).



[Berthold Furtmeyer's illumination (Figure 24), is an illustrated text for the Archbishop of Salzburg (1481) (Gettings, 1978: 72). Eve is not the only woman in the garden. The naked Eve is juxtaposed with Mary. Eve's uncovered state is hence sharply contrasted and accentuated by the Virgin's clothed figure, which suggests wholesomeness and virginity (Grössinger, 1997: 5). Though both are in the garden, but each inhabits a very different moral space within it and their relationship to nature is different. Both stand on the flowers of paradise, but Mary's robe conspicuously covers the flora as she picks 'the body of Christ' from the tree of knowledge of good and evil (Gettings, 1978: 72). The fruit she picks and offers to her followers below her functions as a holy reward. In contrast, Eve almost seems to caress the snake as she picks, from the same tree, the damned fruit, *malum*. This fruit that she feeds the man to her left will, like the skull in the branches above her head, bring death and damnation (Gettings, 1978: 73). As Gettings relays:

(this) imagery links with the early Christian texts which claim a connection between the fruit of the womb of Eve (that is, the *malum* [Latin for evil apple] and the fruit of the womb of Mary (that is, the Christ). (Gettings, 1978: 73)

So the image perpetuates the contestation of 'Life and Death', good and evil (Gettings, 1978: 73). This then underlines the association of evil procreation with Eve. Her nudity and sexuality are represented as complicity immoral. She is the base side of nature, its carnal temptress. She is nature that is sexually active in the garden.

In Lucas Cranach's *Cupid Complaining to Venus*<sup>11</sup> (Figure 25) Venus is portrayed in a nature setting that references the Garden of Eden. The tree that she clasps onto is laden with apples making a direct reference to those familiar biblical representations of Eve's and the temptation of Adam — '...so, to her erotic status as Venus are added the delicious implication of sin.' (Mullins, 1985: 124). This reading is further underlined by the inscription added to the painting by the artist —



Figure 25: Lucas Cranach, the Elder. Circa 1530. *Cupid Complaining to Venus*. (Mullins, 1985: 123).

"So like in manner the brief and fleeting pleasure we seek injures us with sad pain" (Mullins, 1985: 122). Venus and Eve are not the only ones implicated and associated with this visual construction. By her (then) contemporary headdress and necklace Venus also acts as the modish mortal woman, and hence a potential applicant for the reprimanding of vanity.

But the garden that functions more like a meadow and what appears to be untamed nature seems more appropriate for the display of sanctioned sensual love, as mythological Venus, as the guardian of flora and gardens, governs its fecundity (Heilmeyer, 2001: 9, 14). It is this site that becomes such a prominent setting for the Venus figure during the height of the Renaissance (Heilmeyer, 2001: 15). So, in Piero di Cosimo's *Venus, Mars and Amor* (1505) Venus lies languidly amidst flowers as two doves affectionately nuzzle each other, with a hare<sup>12</sup> nestling up to her, while a butterfly rests on her leg. She seems to become a part of nature as it surrounds and envelopes her, her beauty seemingly being integrated into the natural environment. And like the hare, an attribute of Aphrodite since antiquity and a symbol of fecundity,<sup>13</sup> she herself becomes a harbinger of nature's fertile delights who succeeds in subduing the bellicose Mars with her beauty and fecundity (Heilmeyer, 2001: 14).

11 This image is based on the Greek Theocritus's *The Honey Comb Stealer* (3rd Century BC) (Mullins, 1985: 122).

12 A usual sign of fecundity based on the hare's generally acknowledged success in mating (Wörncke, 2004: folio 78).

13 During antiquity it was thought that consuming a serving of hare would enable one to be beautiful for 9 days (Biedermann, 1992: 164).

The incorporation of this bucolic countryside as a pictorial backdrop by artists such as Titian, Tintoretto and Veronese would prove to promote its appeal and encourage its prevalence. Similar subject matter in painted works by Dutch and Flemish artists would add to this pursuit (Cosgrove, 1988: 259). This tendency also corresponds with the fashion for 'villa living', particularly prevalent in Florence and Venice, that became highly sought after (Hagen, 1996: 32). This incorporates both the increasing interest in land acquisition of the time and, in true High Renaissance fashion, the Arcadian ideals of Pliny and Ovid that underlined the association 'between man, society and natural world' in the form of a rural paradise (Cosgrove, 1988: 259–260). Here one must take into account that this was an active structuring of the landscape in which the natural environment was made subservient to structured conventions. This is underlined by the vast amount of documents written on this subject at this time (Cosgrove, 1988: 259). It can be argued that the rendering of meadows and pastoral fields was in fact not an account of 'natural' nature, but an interpretation of an active construction that served very a definite cultural preoccupation that sought to represent artifice as ideal natural reality. This conforms to similar notions that inform the containment and structuring of the garden.

When we look at Giorgione's *Concert Champêtre* (1508–9) one can see how strongly the Venus figure is associated with nature in comparing her nudity to the contrastingly fully clad male figures (Mullins, 1985: 137). The shepherd in the distance draws attention to the Arcadian pursuit underlying this work (Sluiter, 2000: 172–173). In northern art, Lucas Cranach the Elder's *The Judgement of Paris* (1530) a similar phenomenon can be perceived. The men in their shiny, impenetrable-looking armour are in stark contrast to the natural environment and Venus, Juno and Minerva's nudity. The rendition of this mythological subject sees the idealised representation 'dressed' in fashionable necklaces and a hat. This links the figures to contemporary

women of that time, while drawing attention to their nudity in this setting (Lucie-Smith, 1991: 178).



Figure 26. Giorgio Barbarelli (Giorgione). Circa 1508. *Concert Champêtre*. (Mullins, 1985: 137).



Figure 27. Lucas Cranach, the Elder, 1530. *The Judgement of Paris*. (Lucie-Smith, 1991: 179).

Pastoral scenes were also popular in Dutch 17th Century art. Representations of sensual love in nature often drew on renditions of Venus and Adonis reclining in the shade of a tree following a hunting excursion as described by Ovid's mythological account in *Metamorphoses* (AD 8) (Sluijter, 2000: 172-173). This theme that grew immensely favoured abruptly at the beginning of the 17th Century exhibited shameless portrayals of sexual love in nature. The idealised mythological figures were habitually rendered nude and in some form of exceedingly sexual interaction. These explicit images were, however, sanctioned under the guise that the catastrophic outcome of the myth<sup>14</sup> acted as a moral instruction (Sluijter, 2000: 173). Indeed, where the Renaissance celebrated the idealised pair as an incarnation of physical beauty and suggestive of sanctioned betrothal (Hall, 1996: 320), in this period the candid representation of physical beauty and sexuality was contingent on a moralising attitude.

This part of the dissertation has sought to show some of the ways in which Venus and her mortal companions inhabit the garden and nature. The idealised nude woman and her association with nature exhibits a direct correlation to sexuality and fecundity that shifts between love and lust, transgression and sanction within this space. In my own work I divest figures from the context of the garden, but their relationship to nature and the garden, and its dangerous beauty, is directly alluded to by the figures' ironic beautification through flowers and plants.

## Flowers of the Garden

### *Now the Lusty Spring*

Now the lusty spring is seen;  
Golden yellow, gaudy blue,  
Daintily invite the view.  
Everywhere on every green,  
Roses blushing as they blow,  
And enticing men to pull,  
Lilies whiter than the snow,  
Woodbines of sweet honey full:  
All love's emblems, and all cry,

"Ladies, if not plucked, we die."  
Yet the lusty spring hath stayed;  
Blushing red and purest white  
Daintily to love invite  
Every woman, every maid.  
Cherries kissing as they grow,  
And inviting men to taste,  
Apples even ripe below,  
Winding gently to the waist:  
All love's emblems, and all cry,  
"Ladies, if not plucked, we die." John Fletcher, Circa 1600  
(Blair, 2003: 1)

The beautiful woman's association with and personification of nature is further attested to through her alliance with symbols of nature such as flowers and fruits. Turning to the discourse of art scholars Mullins draws our attention to the association of the woman's body with these aspects of the natural world. Edward Lucie Smith in *The Body* (1981) describes Renoir's female nudes as 'ordinary as a flower in full bloom, or a ripe fruit' (Mullins, 1985: 86). Kenneth Clark, when describing Titian's *Sacred and Profane Love*, expounds: "The evening light of Veneto... is made to include the tender fruit, the human body". Regarding an early Greek sculpture named the *Crouching Venus* he declares:

...the plastic wholeness of her pear shaped body has delighted all the ripening sons of art- Titian, Rubens, Renoir - till the present day...the perfect symbol of fruitfulness, feeling earth's pull, like a hanging fruit.  
(Clark in Mullins, 1985: 86)

Similarly telling is his account of Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus*: 'like a bud, wrapped in its sheath, each petal folded' (Mullins, 1985: 86).

As a theme in art flowers have until recently been perceived as outmoded and part and parcel of 'trivial prettiness' (Herzog, 1996: 7). This perception was particularly dominant during the last century. It was predominantly due to movements such as Cubism, Futurism and Modernism that flowers were negated as a worthwhile theme of artistic production (Fuller, 1988: 11). This situation became particularly

14 Scratched by Cupid's arrow Venus developed a great love for Adonis. Adonis was devoted to hunting, but Venus always feared that this pursuit would lead him in harms way. One day as she flitted through the sky she heard her lovers moans as he lay dying from injuries he sustained while hunting a wild boar. She raced to his side, but was not in time and Adonis died from his wounds (Hall: 1996: 319).



pervasive subsequent to WWII (Herzog, 1996: 9). Contemporarily flowers have, however, made a return. Traditional themes of beauty are no longer condemned and a perception of the natural world as vitally significant has become prevalent. Many perceive this phenomenon as indicative of the increased regard for 'environmental awareness' (Herzog, 1996: 7-9).

### The Symbolic Flower

Beyond simply functioning as ornament or a method of beautification, flowers have since the 15th Century been recognised as symbols of deeper meaning (Garibaldi & Moore, 2003: 17). The ancient Greeks also attributed meanings to flowers and associated certain flowers with particular gods and goddesses. This has allowed them to function both as a convenient substratum for bearing conceptual ideas but also as an incentive to produce new avenues of associative meaning (Davies, 1988: 33). The flower, as a symbol, bears witness to the shifting nature of signs and their meanings. This also relates to what Victor Turner has identified as the *multivocal or polysemic nature of symbols*, as:

...one meaning is related to others in an increasingly deep pool of potential meanings available for exploitation by future interpreters. (Davies, 1988: 37)

We once again turn to the Greeks to consider their influence in relation to flowers. The Ancient Grecians exhibited a particular fondness for flowers. They utilised the mythological gods and their escapades to explain natural phenomena, such as the different times of the year, the habitual cycles of the natural world, and the origin and loveliness of flowers (Heilmeyer, 2001: 8). The Greeks aligned transformative theories of metamorphoses – transmutation to both men and women in relation to flowers. An example of this tradition, of which there are many, is found in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (AD 8). Ovid relays the myth of the origin of the sunflower. Clytie, daughter of the ruler of Babylon, adored Apollo,

god of the sun. Apollo, however, rejected her love in favour of her sister's. Clytie's ensuing envy led to the death of her sibling. Subsequently despised by Apollo, she perished and was transformed into a sunflower, bound to follow the journey of the sun god in the skies with her flower face (Hall, 1996: 293).

The Greeks, as previously stated, believed Aphrodite (Venus) to be the guardian of flora and fauna as well as the garden (Heilmeyer, 2001: 9). Hence scores of flowers – the anemone, the lily, the thistle, myrtle, violets and of course the rose – became associated with the goddess. Like her, they relayed notions of beauty and fertility. Subsequent to the destruction of Rome (circa 550 BC), the first Christians distrusted flowers as adornments or themes of art, supposing flowers to be a sign of the corrupt heathen society (Heilmeyer, 2001: 10).

It was Charlemagne, who in approximately 800 AD, reintroduced flowers to Europe and they became integrated and re-interpreted into Christian lexicon and symbolism:

Much literature from antiquity was picked up again and reinterpreted to suit Christian beliefs. Elements of Platonic thought intermingled with Roman, Christian and Teutonic ideas, and all of them influenced human attitudes to plants. (Heilmeyer, 2001: 10)



Figure 28. Artist Unknown. Circa 1497, *Hercules at the Crossroads – Voluptas vs. Virtus*. (Grössinger, 1997: 17).

Flowers once more became charged with meaning and were feverishly reintroduced to Medieval and Renaissance canvasses (Heilmeyer, 2001: 10–12). Examples of the re-interpretation of flowers from antiquity are contained in the appendix of this dissertation (page 80). Many flowers were associated with sexual love and physical beauty and thus Venus became modified with meaning pertaining to the Virgin and her spiritual beauty.

The 15th Century in particular saw a marked interest in the aesthetics of flowers that was accompanied by the biblically infused symbolism. Flowers and fruit as iconographical symbols of vanity functioned much like the mirror when accompanying the personification of Christian vice, the undressed woman (De Girolami Cheney, 1998: 883). This was a favourite device of particularly Dutch and Flemish artists during the 17th Century (De Girolami Cheney, 1998: 883). Flowers functioned as beautifying decoration, while conveying a moralising instruction. Hence *vanitas* imagery functioned in a contradictory manner as the ornamental beauty of flora and fauna, potentially seductive and appealing announced mortality (Leppert, 1996: 44). As symbols of *vanitas*, flowers hence functioned as a type of *momento mori*, analogous to the mirror. They testified to the ever-presence of death and acted as a warning to take heed of worldly delights (De Girolami Cheney, 1998: 884, 886). As stated in the Bible verse (1 Peter 1:24):

All flesh is grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withered, and the flower thereof falleth away. (Peter in Palmer, 1981: 40)

The noteworthy image (Figure 29) is a self-portrait by the Flemish artist Clara Peeters. It is entitled *Vanitas*. It is most interesting how this female artist encodes herself within the moralising framework of the image that traditionally sees male artists chastise women's vanity through the rendition of this theme. She has dressed herself richly, adorned her head and wrists with jewellery and placed a reflective surface in front of herself, while a bunch of flowers fills the background. With this she is



Figure 29. Clara Peeters. Circa 1610. *Vanitas*. (Cal Poly Pomona, 2006: i).

attesting to her own vanity, while simultaneously warning against it. With the inclusion of the flower she has linked herself with its beauty and nature, but simultaneously to its brevity and to sin.

While *vanitas* imagery attempted to entice the viewer to look and find pleasure in what they saw, it simultaneously requested the denouncement of what was perceived as well as the viewer for the delight experienced in looking at representations of earthly beauty (Leppert, 1996: 44). Indeed, as Leppert explains, "*Vanitas* both represents and is itself what it condemns" (1996: 67). Here again we see the conflicting associations of beauty as the flower both beautifies the woman, but simultaneously negates this beauty through suggestions of sin and worldly pleasures. This is not Titian's or the Venetian artist's celebration of the woman's alliance with flowers (Garibaldi & Moore, 2003: 28), where floral displays often represented the 'pleasures of love' (Tinagli, 1997: 100). Instead it becomes a warning of it.

This section has attempted to elucidate the relationship between women and the garden to show how flowers have, beyond devices of beautification and ornament, also acted as mechanisms of meaning in the portrayal of female beauty. The changing significances attributed to flowers would inform the reading of images.

## 1.4 the dissection

This section of the dissertation focuses on aspects of historical scientific practice in relation to the woman. Owing to the vast nature of this subject a comprehensive account is beyond the scope of this document. Rather I have drawn on particular themes and examples pertinent to the choices I have made in the practical body of work.

Dissection is often associated with violence against and 'dehumanisation' of the body (Leppert, 1996: 120). This developed historically with the association of governmental penalty with dissection (Leppert, 1996: 120). It was particularly the corpses of criminals that were mandated for dissection and this practice was prevalent from the end of the Middle Ages up to the mid-19th Century (Kemp & Wallace, 2000: 29). Dissection was viewed as the utmost desecration of the body, and in extreme cases dissections were performed on lawbreakers that were still living (Kemp & Wallace, 2000: 29).

By means of emerging humanism and non-religious themes in painting, the Italian Renaissance artists became increasingly interested in the bodily interior where 'painting met anatomy and dissection' (Leppert, 1996: 129). During the Renaissance bodies were rendered as aware and even participating in their own dissections (Sawday, 1990: 26), associated with the Delphic dictum *noese te ipaum*- 'know thyself' (Kemp & Wallace, 2000: 13). Anatomical inquiry extended beyond the physical to include the spiritual nature (Kemp & Wallace, 2000: 13-14). In Vesalius's *De humani corporis fabrica* (1543) skeletal figures set in the Italian countryside took on classical poses associated with idealised representations of the body (Leppert, 1996: 127). At this time this type of representation acted as a form of propaganda to aid in the social acceptance of dissection (Sawday, 1990: 126). The phenomenon of

representing living figures in the process of dissection (that started during the Renaissance) would, however, persist in the centuries that followed (Petherbridge, 1997: 27). Venus was also employed in such a manner. In his *De dissectione partium corporis humani* (1545) Charles Estienne would incorporate anatomised organs into bodies derived from illustrations to the *Loves of the Gods* (1530) (Kemp & Wallace, 2000: 37). These images bare the traces of 'cut and paste anatomies', as what were previously 'erotic engravings' where overlaid with anatomical illustrations (Petherbridge, 1997: 54). In Juan de Valverde de Hamusco's *La anatomia del corpo humano* (1589) a reserved Venus in the pudica stance displays a dissected interior - *Tab. VI, Libri III* (Figure 30). This stance which is reminiscent of antique representations of Venus was frequently portrayed (Petherbridge, 1997: 54).



Figure 30. Juan de Valverde de Hamusco. 1589. *Tab. VI, Libri III*. (Petherbridge, 1997: 57).

The pairing of the idealised female body with anatomical concerns would continue as Govard Bidloo (1649-1713) opened his *Anatomia humani corporis* (1685) with idealised illustrations of mythological Apollo and Venus. Later in this work Bidloo would attest to the idealised woman as a



subject of anatomical scrutiny. In a rendition of a woman's back muscles, the styling of the cloth around the body is suggestive of drapery traditionally associated with the female nude. In an illustration entitled *Woman's Abdominal Muscles* the decorative fabric folded over the pubic area hints at a similar approach. This is, however, not the only element that is extraneous to scientific knowledge that has been added to the woman's dissected body. Placed on the swathed cloth and positioned towards the visceral interior of the body a housefly has been represented. This fly rendered in a concentrated brown colour, which is not perceptible anywhere else in the illustration, raises the question of the body as a subject or object (Leppert, 1996: 141–143). By the fly's presence the print's parallels to the 'beautiful woman' are denigrated and derided – "She is now a stinking corpse soon to be food to maggots" (Leppert, 1996: 141).

The interior of the woman's body has long been maligned with revulsion and fear. For centuries the body remained uncharted territory, with the complete anatomical recording of the body's interior only accomplished in the 18th Century (Petherbridge, 1997: 96). The conception of the woman's external beauty as a cover for interior decay had been established much earlier by Christian teaching. As I have mentioned there was the belief that the interior of the woman's body stood in contrast to its tempting exterior, relaying the enticing body as a 'deceptive' vessel of dreadful sin and corruption – the unclean and repulsive (Arscott & Scott, 2000: 19). The physical characteristics of this spiritual purification are relayed by the 10th Century Abbot Odo of Cluny who describes the female body as 'a sack of rottenness' (Warner, 1985: 251). He also argued that:

The beauty of a woman is only skin-deep. If men could only see what is beneath the flesh and penetrate below the surface with the eyes like the Boeotian lynx, they would be nauseated just to look at women, for all this feminine charm is nothing but phlegm, blood, humours,

gall. Just imagine all that is hidden in nostrils, throat and stomach... We are all repelled to touch and ordure even with our fingertips. How then can we ever want to embrace what is merely a sack of rottenness? (Cluny in Warner, 1985: 251)

In this context the inviting exterior was perceived as a disguise of the sinful corruption of what lay below. The early Christian conception of the vagina as the entrance to hell (Mullins, 1985: 55) is another case in point, as is the castration anxiety associated with the *virgina dendata* (Lucie-Smith, 1991: 66). Much later the anxiety and repulsion associated with the woman's 'interior' would find resonance in Freud's narration of 'his dream of Irma's Injection' (Key, 1995: 155). At a social gathering Freud inspects the mouth of a woman also present there. He finds the interior of her mouth filled with ulcers and infected sores and is revolted and distressed. Later in the dream a treatment is located for the offending orifice and the situation is contained. When confronted with the festering female mouth Freud was appalled and distressed by what he perceived as 'the very origin of the world' (comparable to the woman's sex organs). Kristeva refers to this as a condition based on 'the abjection of contact with the feminine' (Key, 1995: 155).

Phrases like 'beauty is only skin deep' – first coined in 1616 by John Davies (Marwick, 1988: 444) – that are still in common use today, imply that physical beauty is superficial. This conception is underlined by the long tradition of portraying the beautiful woman that focused exclusively on the exterior body as the site of beauty. Counters for the associations of hidden repulsion did exist. Anatomical illustration that combined botanical elements with the woman's body attempted to offset the negative and frightening correlations between women and their biological interiors – particularly the sin and fear associated with the female sex organs (Kemp & Wallace, 2000: 172). In his *De Formato Foetu* (1626) Belgian anatomist Adrianus Spigelius exhibits this pursuit as the *Petal Venus* (Figure 31) which shows the gradual

dissection of the female abdomen rendered to resemble the unfolding of a flower's petals. This draws on the associations of flowers with both 'modesty' and fecundity (Kemp & Wallace, 2000: 172). This image is also evocative of the foetus as the fruit of the womb, with 'seed analogies' being a repeated theme at this time (Kemp & Wallace, 2000: 42).



Figure 31. Odoardo Fialetti, 1626, *Petal Venus*. (Petherbridge, 1997: 91).

The end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th centuries saw the bloom of anatomical wax modelling (Kemp & Wallace, 2000: 59). In some of the Clemente Susini wax anatomies details of the dissected female abdomen were rendered to resemble tiny flowers. The fear-provoking associations connected to the female interior are perceptible in the Latin term for the ovarian tubes, *morsus diaboli*- the 'devils bite' – that Susini represented as diminutive flora (Kemp & Wallace, 2000: 172). Susini, as part of the *La Specola* studio, however, also represented an idealised anatomised female body. In the *Reclining Female figure* (circa 1890) a dissected Venus-like woman is represented as languishing on what appears to be a mattress covered by a silken bedspread. Her

posture is attributed to the 'spiritual reverie' of a dying woman that is about to join her creator, the author of her body/the 'divine contraption' (Kemp & Wallace, 2000: 60–61). To the contemporary viewer who is accustomed to medical principles that emphasise that the dissected body should be presented in a 'neutralised' and academic environment (Petherbridge, 1997: 96), Susini's representation is potentially suggestive of disquieting sexual ecstasy. But it is worth taking into account that representations and images like these, that were often highly aestheticised and filled with apparently superfluous trivialities, were not just meant as scientific reference but also emotive communications about the body's relationship to the macrocosm and God (Kemp & Wallace, 2000: 68).



Figure 32. Anonymous, 18th/19th Century, *Pregnant Female Figure*. (Petherbridge, 1997: 57).

The 19th Century saw a shift in the style of anatomical illustration as the vocations of the artist and physician grew progressively more specific (Kemp & Wallace, 2000: 18). The style that functioned as the established standard was that of a cognisant 'non-style' as exhibited by Gray in his *Anatomy* (1858). His style exhibited a 'no-frills' attitude that attempted to privilege fact, not aesthetics or emotive communication (Kemp & Wallace, 2000: 17, 32). This 'facts-only' portrayal of

images of dissection was, however, not all-pervasive, as the representations of Hasselhorst (1825-1904), Gabriel Max (1840-1915) and John Brodnax (1864-1926) would portray the beautiful female cadaver in the process of dissection. These exhibit the uncomfortable conflating of a body of beauty and the object of science as the desire for the erotic and scientific knowledge meet in the female form. In images such as these women's bodies are seemingly visually, anatomically and erotically 'unveiled' as the artist-anatomist lifts the flesh like a transparent fabric from the idealised cadaver (Jordanova, 1989: 98-101).

In *Sexual Visions* Jordanova argues that during the 19th Century women's bodies, as objects of western scientific analysis, recalled the traditional personification and associations of women to nature (Jordanova, 1989: 14, 19). She suggests that nature plays home to both unthreatening female fecundity and the destructive and mysterious other, and that nature has historically elicited a powerful 'curiosity' for the unknown (Jordanova, 1989: 14). Women, like nature, were thus perceived as the unexplained other (Jordanova, 1989: 98) in relation to men and science – to be scrutinised and explained in equivalent terms by the male gaze-culture (Jordanova, 1989: 110). Louis Barrias's 1899 sculpture provides a vivid example of this. *Nature Unveiling Herself Before Science* presents an attractive young woman, in the moment of displaying herself, her breasts already visible. Jordanova makes it clear that what this elucidates is the implication that science is a male viewer, who is anticipating the full knowledge of nature, which is represented as the naked female body (Jordanova, 1989: 87). Here issues of investigation, analysis and display in both art and science are made concrete in a physical form. The woman's body is beheld in the guise of nature that through science, the domain of the male, is to be explained and mastered.

According to Jordanova this phenomenon is also what informs the work of Hasselhorst, Max and Brodnax. In Hasselhorst's 1887 work entitled *Lucas*

*and His Assistants Dissecting a Female Cadaver* (Figure 33) an idealised young woman is presented on the dissection table. She is surrounded by a group of men consisting of both artists and anatomists. Close to her well-defined breast the anatomist has started dissecting and is displaying a layer of skin – 'the corpse is indeed being undressed scientifically – the sense of inquiring into nature for both aesthetic and scientific purposes is conveyed' (Jordanova, 1989: 89).



Figure 33. Hasselhorst, 1887. *Lucas and his Assistants Dissecting a Female Cadaver*. (Jordanova, 1989:).

This section has attempted to give insight into aspects of historical scientific practice in representations of the anatomised woman. In portrayals of the dissected woman scientific knowledge was often accompanied by references to the idealised exterior that housed the potentially frightening unknown. Hence the borders between art and science, subject and object often became blurred and ambiguous.

### The Collection

Another aspect of medical science is the medical collection traditionally housed by the boundaries of the cabinet. This short section acts as an overview of certain aspects of the relationship between the collector, the collection and the viewer of the collected object.

The desire to possess the object and create meaning through its appropriation can be perceived as a fundamental drive inherent to



collecting. The object housed in a collection cabinet suggests the preservation and display of something deemed precious and worthy of protection and safekeeping. The cabinet detaches the object from its previous context, while conferring significance and cultural value on it. This re-articulation and relocation of that which is being collected, is intrinsic to the power exerted over the object. The viewer's relationship to the object in the cabinet suggests both access and exclusion.

Medical and botanical cabinets that house scientific specimens generally suggest modes of preservation and observation in keeping with scientific methods of accessing. Those approaches aim to gain and construct knowledge through the act of looking, collecting, assessing and scrutinising. Much like the medical sciences, the botanical discipline suggests the activities of cataloguing, categorisation, accuracy and 'eye-centred' impartial facts (Leppert, 1996: 52). With a collection there is the expectation of the specimen, removed from its respective context, as the chosen exemplar of a particular group of 'objects', to be explained by its relationship to other collected specimens (Pearce, 1994: 10). Generally the specimen does not function in seclusion as accompanying textual descriptions designate meaning through concise clarifications of the specimen (Welchman, 2001: 34).

To the contemporary eye the historic scientific cabinets often do not display this relationship to what they collect. The medical 'cabinets' of Fredrik Ruysch (1638–1731) – doctor, obstetrician, anatomist, botanist and embalmer – re-articulated medical specimens into aesthetic artefacts (Leppert, 1996: 129–30). Here science and botany were combined with fantasy and invention. His vast collection included bottled specimens that combined dismembered limbs with botanical and animal objects in decorative designs. Another aspect of this collection was highly ornamented

displays that combined plant life, dissected body parts and human skeletons into an animated spectacle set on top of a wooden base. Contingent with views on collecting, this collection was shaped by the inclinations and interests of the collector (Pearce, 1994: 157).

Like any collection, Ruysch's cabinets were constructed around a particular theme/idea/belief that the collection exhibited. Central to this collection is the import of morality and coinciding mortality with scientific fact and knowledge that becomes subservient to these themes – the pieces are inundated with *memento mori* (Leppert, 1996: 133). So in *Decorative-Anatomical Display: Five Infant Skeletons* (Figure 34) the diminutive skeleton in the front of the work is manoeuvred to hold a mayfly. Both the skeleton and the insect symbolise the ephemeral nature of human existence. The accompanying clarificatory text is not scientific in nature, rather it is the emotive monologue of a tiny skeleton:

What are we anyway? What remains of us after our death? Oh, see, it is only bone... Oh, fate.  
Oh, bitter fate!... When my life was given to me in the first hour, at the same moment my death was forecast...  
Oh, how horrible the condition of men in this life.  
(Leppert, 1996: 135)

A further example of the interweaving of the scientific with issues of morality is seen in a work that shows a prostitute's skull, deformed by syphilis, being kicked by the skeleton of a child. (Leppert, 1996: 135). In Ruysch's creations the scientific 'art' object is conferred very specific and deliberate meaning and value that does not suggest the neutrality that 19th Century medical practice would purport to demonstrate. Ruysch's artefacts come to stand for his own 'truth'.

In Ruysch's cabinet of curiosities the three-dimensionality of the objects are of vital importance. Possession of the wondrous object or artefact was central to implied status. Ruysch's



Figure 34. C.H. Huijberts after Fredrik Ruysch. 1744.  
*Decorative Anatomical Display: Five Infant Skeletons.*  
(Leppert, 1996: 135).

collection was offered to the view of the general public – an antecedent of the museum (Leppert, 1996: 131–32). But while the general public could access it visually, actual ownership was only a possibility for the exceedingly wealthy. Indeed this collection functioned on the same principles as the public museum functions on today.

During the Middle Ages and Renaissance accounts of the *wunderkammer* were habitually related in relation to who owned it as Thomas Kaufmann explains, "The emperor's possession of a *Kunstkamer*, the world in microcosm expressed his symbolic mastery of the world" (Kaufmann in Greenblatt, 1991: 50–51). Testament to this is that Ruysch's whole collection would be bought by Russian Emperor Peter the Great in 1717 (Kemp & Wallace, 2000: 63).

The interrelation between the object and the need and desire for possession – is a characteristic of collecting, arguably extending beyond a particular historical time period. Possession is, however, inextricably linked to displacement, transformation and re-contextualisation of the object and the inscription of value in relation to the owner. For those who cannot possess the object the only access is visual which functions on the same dialectic as the contemporary museum that – 'at once evoke(s) the dream of possession and evacuate(s) it' (Greenblatt, 1991: 49). The collection ascribes value to the object through its requisitioning in the cabinet, that both elevates its value (culturally and often economically), but simultaneously separates it. Hence access and possession become problematical.

## 2. contemporary representations of women and beauty

### 2.1 fracturing the image of the female body

Traditionally the aesthetic criteria for the representation of the idealised body has required the body to be smooth, whole and uncompromised. Arscott and Scott (2000: 12) suggest that the 'aesthetic and sexual charge' of Venus figures are often dependent on their completeness. The preservation of wholeness has, however, not prevailed as the body has rallied against its externally-imposed values as "The sign of the female body, shaped by female hands this century does not present itself as an unbroken container" (Warner, 1985: 263). Nicholas Mirzoeff proposes that the contemporary sense of fragmentation of the body is a reaction to the collapse of the ideal body in representation (Mirzoeff, 1995: 28). Tellingly it has been female artists in particular who have fractured the idealised representation of female beauty.

Niki de Saint-Phalle creates her own sculpture of the Venus de Milo, which she fires sachets of paint at. This attack is launched at the figure she considers to be the original personification of all the 'old European cultural values' inculcated in the traditional male representation of women in art (Wilson, 2000: 158). Her 'bullets' of paint do not penetrate the surface of the piece. Instead they hug the surface like the opening of a large wound that calls to mind an existence behind that of the surface.

This fracturing of the woman's body has not only



Figure 35. Niki de Saint-Phalle, 1962. *Venus de Milo*. (Wilson, 2000: 158).



Figure 36. Frida Kahlo, 1944. *The Broken Column*. (Warner, 1985: 300).



been an attack on the representation of women by what is perceived as a phallogentric canon. It has also acted as an attempt for women to access their own bodies beyond the surface. Artists like Frida Kahlo have broken and opened their bodies in self-portraits, making the interior visible and portraying an emotively loaded inside (Warner, 1985: 263).

With these 'openings' there is the negation of the woman's experience of the body as only bound to extremities and surfaces. Fractured, the body displays the relation of the exterior to that of the interior. The body, through the visual expression of corporality and its visceral qualities, becomes a site of individual experience beyond that of its casing (Warner: 1985, 263–6).

Similar themes are evident in the work of Kiki Smith. In *Virgin Mary* (1992) she creates a skinless rendition of this traditional symbol of virginal purity. This underlines her concern with expressing the visceral corporality of the female body. Concurrently Smith explores and questions female figures from historical texts and legends. Through her sculptures of the body that portray the visceral interior she reinvests women of the Bible and myth with real physicality (Engberg, 2005: 1).

Similarly South African artist Leora Farber denies the female exterior of the body its art historical perfection as internal conflicts of the feminine are brought to the surface. In her *Skin-Less* (1997) installation the visceral interior becomes incorporated into the exterior of the dresses and corsets. The exterior is ruptured to show what lies beneath the skin. The works fluctuate between the beautiful and the repulsive as what appears to be decorative ornament, on closer inspection reveals itself to be meticulously rendered viscera seemingly dissected and reformulated into macabre adornments (Friedman, 1997: 1).

The long tradition of portraying the beautiful woman that focused exclusively on the exterior as



Figure 37. Leora Farber. 1997. *Skin-Less VIII*. (Friedman, 1997: 1).

the site of beauty has been questioned by artists that have drawn on practices of dissection that have historically been the domain of the male scientist. Nina Toglio (Figure 38) in a series of works named *Real Dolls* (2005) recalls these conceptions by overlaying actual imagery of bodily dissection on her own image. She challenges traditional stereotypes of female beauty in art by mixing and contrasting the grotesque and the



Figure 38. Nina Toglio. 2005. *Real Dolls*. (Skinner & Wisten, 2006: 95).



beautiful through the female body (Skinner & Wisten, 2006: 95).

Orshi Drozdik in her installation projects entitled *Manufacturing the Self* (1993) directly references the historic scientific practices of dissection where the female body is perceived as an object of nature for scientific enquiry (Jordanova, 1989: 24). She considers the construction of female identity in relation to historic, scientific and medical practice and museum representation (Hegyí, 2002: 1) and establishes herself as an artist who engages with the phenomenon that Petherbridge draws attention to:

The ethics of 20th Century medicine have determined that the anatomical body should be displayed in a 'neutralised' scientific and scholarly context. Contemporary artists are deliberately challenging the professed dispassion of museological discourse and the taboos surrounding it, and are subjecting museological material to new kinds of public display within the aestheticised but critical space of the art gallery. (Petherbridge, 1997: 96)

In *Manufacturing the Self* a 'medical Venus' is cast from Drozdik's own body (Welchman, 2001: 111). The piece is motivated by an interest in the representation of the woman with regard to Clemente Susini's medical wax models of the late 18th Century (Hegyí, 2002: 2). Drawing on these representations the figure in this work is in the recumbent position of the nude, whilst the open cavity in the chest seemingly anticipates medical intrusion (Hegyí, 2002: 2).



Figure 39. Orshi Drozdik. 1993. *Manufacturing Self, Body Self and Medical Venus*. (Welchman, 2001: 114).

This brings to mind the 19th Century representations of Hasselhorst, Brodnax and Max that showed the idealised female corpse in the process of dissection as an object of nature, accessed for scientific and erotic inquiry (Jordanova, 1989: 98–101). Indeed Drozdik's Venus is not Kenneth Clark's (1956) *Olympia*. She is passive, reclined and vulnerably 'open' to the male gaze of science.

The artists discussed above demonstrate how, through visual and sculptural fragmentation and 'dissection', the female body has been re-inscribed with new meaning while responding to past representations of bodily beauty as an informing resource. The past acts as fertile ground for re-imagining and responding to the woman's body in a contemporary context.



## 2.2 the reflection

Many contemporary female artists have turned to the mirror to investigate conditions of femininity. The mirror and reflective surfaces such as glass have become important devices in facilitating a personal encounter between the viewer and the art object. For the female viewer the relationship to her own beauty and sexuality often becomes instrumental in her encounter with the 'reflective' artwork.

The 1996 exhibition *La Toilette de Venus: Women and Mirrors* (CRG Gallery, New York), curated by Tom Jones, interrogates this phenomenon. The title of the exhibition and the pieces it showcases draw on the art historically fraught relationship between the woman and the mirror. The difficulty in situating a true image of self within the mirror frame was displayed by many of the works of this group exhibition. Louise Bourgeois in her work *Pillar* (undated) replaces an abstracted female form's face with a mirror, while the sex organs exist only as a void (Cotter, 1996: 1). The viewers can attempt to see their own image reflected, but potential personal identity is not accompanied by a sexual presence. The mirrors of Lutz Bacher questioned the ability of women to construct beauty beyond male standards, as she represented men's daydreams of masturbation etched on the reflective surface. Kiki Smith's contribution to the show strongly referenced *vanitas* symbolism (Cotter, 1996: 1). Several hand-cast mirrors of various dimensions revealed the inconsistencies and flaws reminiscent of the looking glass of the Middle Ages. Subsequently the viewer's reflection was fragmented and slightly distorted in the 'old' mirrors' surfaces that referenced historic associations with vanity and mortality (Cotter, 1996: 1). The mirror therefore functioned as a device through which the artist could directly involve the viewers, while allowing them to perceive their own fractured image in the artwork.

Like the reflective surface of the mirror, artists have also made use of the reflective qualities of glass to draw the viewer into a dialogue with the art work and the subjects portrayed. In his exhibition *A Personal Public* (2004), Ken Aptekar borrows paintings relating to Madame de Pompadour from the Late Baroque and Rococo periods. He repaints these art historical works, often altering them by strategies such as mirroring, cropping or changing the original full colour renditions to a monotone. He then bolts them behind glass where image meets text sandblasted on the reflective surface. The glass plays a fundamental role in the work as it acts as a meeting ground between the historical subject, the contemporary viewer and the intentions of the artist. In looking through the reflective glass, the image and the text enable a 'conversation' between the viewer and art history (Cooley Art Gallery, 2004: 1). The reflection in the glass remains out of the artist's control and draws attention to the spectator's own role in the production of meaning in relation to artwork (Cooley Art Gallery, 2004: 1).



Figure 40. Ken Aptekar, 2004. *A blas þar mir, a blas þar dir*. (Cooley Art Gallery, 2004: 1).

Contemporary artists have also turned to the mirror as a means to access narcissism as an outlet for creative expression. In many cases this access seeks to promote narcissism as pleasure beyond unease and distress (Welchman, 2001: 183, 208) with the mirror functioning as a means of introspection and the portrayal of beauty. Artists like Barbara Bloom in her installation *The Reign of Narcissism* (1998) creates a space invested with



15 Apart from Dada and Surrealism (Kemp & Wallace, 2000: 150).

16 See, for example, Georges Braque's *Woman with Guitar*, 1913.

17 See, for example, René Magritte's, *Philosophy in the Boudoir*, 1947.

historically reclaimed objects that the artist associates with narcissism and the reproduction of the self-image associated with the reflective surface (Welchman, 2001: 195). Hence she 'reflects' and inflects her own image into all these objects, such as shell cameos, silhouettes and vases. Busts of the artist that stylistically resemble Greek sculpture have been cast and recast, with the artist's face doubled and multiplied like a mirror image. The mirror as narcissistic object is represented in the section of the installation named *The Vanity Mirrors*, allowing for the viewer's presence, while underlining Bloom's project of personal inspection (Welchman, 2001: 193–194).



Figure 41. Barbara Bloom, 1989, *The Reign of Narcissism* (Welchman, 2001: 194).

Hence the mirror and the reflective surface have become a contemporary concern of women's relationship to beauty and vanity – from the female artist's perspective – and allowed for a bridge between the artist and the viewer. The examples above suggest the mirror's use as an agent of introspection, but also artistic expression.

## 2.3 a return to nature

Modernism habitually viewed renditions of female beauty, and as such female beauty in nature, as unimportant and backward. Such themes were perceived to be concerned with inconsequential prettiness and the body in general ceased to be a pivotal concern in representation<sup>15</sup> (Kemp & Wallace, 2000: 151). Avant-garde modernists opposed traditional notions of beauty, which they believed to be an extension of bourgeois conventions. The 'female subject' that for so long had played an essential part in art became lost, non-essential and even denigrated (Steiner, 2001: xix, xvi). With this shift the alignment of the idealised representation of the female beauty in nature became much less prevalent. The female body became known through abstraction, geometric re-figuration<sup>16</sup> and its non-appearance (Steiner, 2001: 53–54).<sup>17</sup>

More direct representations of the human body would resurface during the 1960s and 1970s. These often engaged 're-appropriating the body' from the traditional male hegemony and were a particular concern in feminist art (Kemp & Wallace, 2000: 152). The women's relationship to nature would reappear as a particular concern, but now from the perspective of women. The assimilations of aspects of nature and the female body would, however, prove difficult for female artists.

Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* (1974), an installation consisting of 39 plates set out on a table, aimed at paying homage to ingenious women deemed omitted from history by the 'phallogocentric canon'. The installation set out to commemorate these women and rejoice in womanhood, while simultaneously creating a historical account of 'matriarchal heritage' from a female angle (Jefferies, 1995: 167). Each ceramic plate displayed a decidedly decorative rendering of women's sex organs (Key, 1995: 155) that

strongly referenced aspects of nature, particularly flowers. As Chicago states:

I want to make butterfly images – and I want them all to have vaginas so they'll be female butterflies and at the same time be shells, flowers, flesh, forest – all kind of things simultaneously. (Warner, 1985: 265)

These 'floral allegories' (Kemp & Wallace, 2000: 153) employed in this celebration of a matriarchal history can be seen as playing on the natural relationship between nature and the female body. While this work has been advocated as the 'epitome of feminist' art (Kemp & Wallace: 2000: 153) it would, however, come under serious critique for maintaining gender binary divisions traditionally associated with the female body, such as 'nature/culture', 'clean/dirty', and 'open/closed' (Warner, 1985: 265). As Lisa Tickner states:

...the deployment of the fixed signs of femininity produces a reverse discourse, a political/aesthetic strategy founded on the same terms in which 'difference' has already been laid down. (Tickner, 1984: 369)

The associations of domination, exclusion and objectification related to the women's traditional relationship to nature would prove this subject matter difficult to broach and assimilate in the visual arts.

An altered sensitivity to the significance of nature is, however, perceptible in more recent contemporary practice. Notions of union with nature, rather than domination and exploitation have become more and more prevalent (Herzog, 1996: 7). This is a trend that Fuller detects and deems the 'ecology of our individual bodies' that conveys our reliance on the natural environment and suggests a development of 'organic unity' between humans and the natural world (Fuller, 1988: 13). Artists such as Anna Hill have creatively portrayed this perception. In *Foetal space* (1999) she creates an image that merges an unborn human embryo and the planet by using Doppler and ultrasound equipment (Kemp & Wallace, 2000: 155). The shifting conception of the relationship

between humanity and nature is instructive as it realigns both men and women to the natural environment. The failure to value and 'celebrate' nature in relation to women increasingly relates to an omission to detect 'the indispensable conditions for life' (Irigaray, 2004: 155, 232).

Kiki Smith's more recent work turns increasingly toward nature, with the artist stating, 'the fate of humankind is intimately interconnected with the health of the environment' (Bayles, 2006: 1). The artist's sculpted female bodies with aspects of nature can be described as reclamation of nature for women. In the piece *Spring* (undated) the young woman with foliage growing from her back acts as an embodiment of nature and acts as the 'celebration of new life' (Kukje, 2006: 1). Her *Roses* (1992) represents the woman enveloped by a flowering plant with its ornamented beauty an aspect of her work that is celebrated rather than censored. In fact, Smith believes the decorative should be used vigorously as a counter to its pervasive use to deprecate 'women's art' (Kukje, 2006: 1).



Figure 42. Kiki Smith: 1992. *Roses*. (Fortier, 2006: 1).

Tracy Payne aligns the female body with aspects of nature and beauty in Figure 43 and 44. Flowers and the body merge together to relay her passage to

psychic 'full bloom' (Monson, 2005: 40–41). The alignment of the body with aspects of the natural world is not intended to perpetuate separation, but rather to suggest a personal celebration – a 'redemption song' (Monson, 2005: 40).



Figure 43. Tracy Payne. 2005. *Toward Late Spring*. (Monson, 2005: 41).

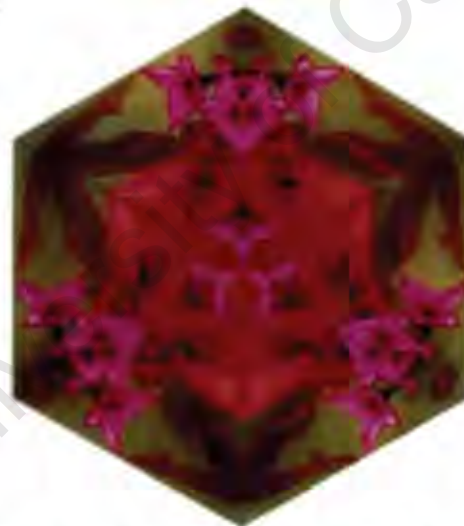


Figure 44. Tracy Payne. 2005. *Together We Can*. (Monson, 2005: 40)

In the work of these artists lie the suggestion of a changing attitude to nature and the representation of female beauty.

## 2.4 an avenue to beauty

Arguably many artists are not denying aspects of feminine beauty in their representations of the female body. For me, contemporary artists like Leora Faber, Nina Toglio, and particularly Kiki Smith and Tracy Payne (particularly her recent work discussed above) all imbue their representations of the female body with varying degrees of beauty. This acts as a strategy in relation to the particular concerns of the different artists in many cases, which I have touched on in the sections above. It is my belief that this phenomenon is also reflective of the changing contemporary approach towards beauty that has become evident.

Beyond modernist rejection, feminist rebuke, historical moral agendas and accusations of narcissism the end of the millennium has seen a new regard for beauty and its positive attributes. This has enabled an alternative context in which to access images of female beauty and its past historical portrayals. New theories on beauty that apply to representations of female beauty in particular have suggested that the reception of beauty need not be a negative or demeaning experience for women. These theories underline beauty as a reciprocal experience that does not necessarily require denial or guilt in celebrating/accepting beauty. Steiner in *Venus in Exile – The Rejection of Beauty in 20th-Century Art* consequently argues for female beauty as an experience of equal opportunity:

If we can discover the bonds between value and mutuality forged in aesthetic response, the female subject of art will be available once again to symbolise a beauty that moves us to pleasure. And that pleasure will be life advancing rather than exclusive or oppressive. (Steiner, 2001: xxv)



Steiner suggests that women's beauty and portrayals of this beauty allow for an interface between the 'self' and 'other' in which beauty can be located in the other, but also in ourselves. In this manner we can partake in the experience of beauty (Steiner, 2001: xxi, xxiv): An encounter with beauty is therefore seen as a change over of power, in which the source of beauty, the art 'object' can also affect the viewer (Steiner, 2001: xxi).

Similarly Elaine Scarry asserts that our interaction with beauty need not occur on unequal terms. Beauty is not a mute object on which viewership is merely inflicted, but rather the object too can transform the viewer. She elaborates on the effect seeing someone we deem beautiful can have on us – the accelerated heartbeat, the profuse sweating, and so on (Scarry, 1999: 75–76). She argues that:

The very symmetry of beauty...leads us to, or somehow assists us in discovering, the symmetry that eventually comes into place in the realm of justice (Scarry, 1999: 97).

Ellen Lamberts, perceiving female beauty as a manifestation of love, re-evaluates the visual reception of the male viewer, stating that not all modes of looking are similar. She asserts that there exists the gaze of subjugation, but also 'the eyes of love' in which a woman can find pleasure and the chance to perceive herself from the perspective of the other (Steiner, 2001: 218-219).

While it is not my intention to insist that this is a motivating force behind the work of the artists, I have discussed in the prior section, I felt it imperative to underline the changing attitude towards beauty that ultimately allows the viewer to potentially access images of female beauty in a positive and self-affirming manner. These theories are suggestive of a belief that the recognition and pursuit of beauty can be a valid endeavour for female artists and viewers.

# 3. the practical body of work

18 The term visual dissection refers to the removal of portions of the pictorial exterior of appropriated idealised bodies by means of digital manipulation.

## 3.1 introduction

This section acts as an introduction to some of the themes and strategies employed in the practical body of work that has been formed and influenced by my reading of art historical representations of female beauty. The practical work's structure, medium and iconographic choices engage with a scrutiny of the mechanisms of meaning that have historically shaped the relationship between beauty and the woman. Indeed, what is very much at stake here is how the woman's body and beauty are ensnared between 'historical constructions' and the experience of 'present pleasures' (Welchman: 2001, 49).

The strategies of layering, fragmentation and dissection of the idealised body are in response to the multiple and conflicting concepts – such as beauty, death, sin, eroticism – that the woman's body has historically been made to symbolise and hence a sense of unresolved identity. This makes reference to my own experience of beauty and the conflicting roles that aspiring to the ideal embodiment of beauty implies. The presence of the mirror – in the works' structural aspects, through the reflective property of glass and mirrored film adhered behind printed image – continually makes the viewer's presence part of the pieces. These reflective aspects mirror the 'look' of the viewer, imploring him or her to consider their own 'gaze' and relationship to this representation of beauty.

In the practical work, the female body is seen as a signifier of beauty and desire as well as sinful eroticism that is surrounded by and ornamented with aspects of nature. On closer inspection, the body is, however, decontextualised as it floats over

multiple sections of glass and aspects of the internal viscera filter through the layers like a palimpsest. The viewer's look and presence are caught in sections of mirror and the reflective surface. Plants merge with organs in the cavities of the body, forming patterns on the glass. The interior is as accessible as the exterior.

In his discussion of femininity, Freud (1905) protested that the sexual life of women is 'veiled in impenetrable obscurity' (Freud in Strachey, 1957: 151). Throughout art history the female body has habitually appeared uncovered, unveiled if you will. Yet the woman's personal experience of sexuality and pleasure has often been obscured and denied by allegorical guises and iconographic signifiers informed, not by women, but by dominant cultural ideologies. These have problematised the reality of women's experience of their own bodies and beauty. Through an alignment to nature, as personifications of vanity and the bearers of both sin and virtue, the multiple manifestations of the idealised female body have been imbued with cultural attitudes as Foucault explains:

The body is...directly involved in a political field, power relations have an immediate hold on it, they invest in it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs. (Foucault, 1979: 25)

### Fragmentation and visual dissection<sup>18</sup>

The fragmentation of the body in the practical work subverts the traditional art historical renditions of beauty that required the female body to be intact, smooth and uncompromised. The strategy of perforating these bodies disrupts the gaze that is conventionally programmed for titillation and pleasure (whether 'looking' in censure or celebration) and forces the viewer to become an active 'dissector' as beyond the bodily openings viscera is visible. This shift from exterior to interior

is suggestive of the contesting themes of beauty versus repulsion, gratification versus denial, and wholeness versus fragmentation I associate with historical representations of the woman's body. Through these visions of interior corporality there is an intention to shift the 'Venus' towards the realm of physical existence that extends beyond that of mythological legend – 'the celestial ideal'<sup>19</sup> or a signifier for bearing abstract concepts.

Through perforation and the juxtaposition of the 'Renaissance' nude with images of dissection and medical illustration it is my intention to destabilise the female body through confrontation with the notion of nakedness that is associated with scientific practice. By visually 'dissecting' and puncturing historical representations of the ideal, the work problematises the traditional renderings of beauty by making reference to both nudity and nakedness. The rendition of female beauty is traditionally associated with the nude that stereotypically involves an 'idealised depersonalised representation' (Hollander: 1993, 157). Clark describes this as 'a balanced, prosperous, and confident body: the body re-formed' (Leppert, 1996: 211). By visually dissecting the body beautiful, its ideal perfection is, however, interrupted and it becomes exposed and stripped, and veers toward the naked. Nakedness makes reference to notions of fragility and vulnerability, but simultaneously also the real physicality. As Berger proposes, being naked is to 'be oneself' (Leppert, 1996: 212).

In my choice of idealised representations of female beauty I have purposely appropriated figures in the vertical position in order to manipulate their meaning in relation to their 'dissection'. Art historically, representations of the nude are predominantly horizontal in nature – 'anchored to the horizon, to nature, to earth – and to bed' (Leppert, 1996: 216–7). By focusing on renderings of vertical figures of idealised beauty, it is my intention to negate the added availability of the passive reclining nude. The standing figure allows for a more active presence and makes visual

reference to representations of dissected bodies of the Renaissance that were rendered as aware and sometimes partaking in the dissection of their bodies (Sawday, 1990: 26). Self-dissection thematically relates to my own work as an acknowledgement of my critical awareness of the gaze in relation to the naked form of beauty – as the ability to penetrate idealised representation. This draws on what art historian Marcia Pointon refers to as 'see through' – the capacity to recognise the 'visual technologies' of representation that relegates women to objecthood (Leppert, 1996: 214). Pointon employs the authority of her own gaze to undermine and subvert patriarchal agendas in visual representation (Leppert: 1996: 214), as a kind of modern *Noëse te Ipsum* – Know thyself (Petherbridge, 1997: 34). A similar understanding is at play as the 'Venus' bodies are pictorially dissected.

Through the employment of visual dissection that reveals plants fused with organs, the cabinet that references scientific collections and the use of glass that suggests the specimen slide, I attempt to recall and bear testament to approaches to the woman's body that rendered her an object to be assessed, analysed and gazed at. This approach also references the traditional personification and associations of the woman to nature that is associated with 19th century scientific practice. These strategies fragment the body and suggest the gaze of discovery, penetration and scrutiny in a space where biology and the woman's representation of beauty is assembled as an object. This also refers to a scientific relationship to the body where individuality and identity are supposedly immaterial. These approaches to the body as an object can be extended to include the nude, Berger (1972) and Nead's (1992) views on conventions of the nude and the male gaze suggest that issues of individuality and identity are similarly unimportant when viewing the unclothed ideal.

The idealised body engages with conscious strategies of objectification in an attempt to draw

<sup>19</sup> Randolph states: "feminist scholarship has provided convincing explanations why Western artists have chosen more often than not to represent ideal and allegorical figures as women, and real historical figures as men. Marina Warner and Sigrid Wiegel, for example, have demonstrated how this separation reflects and reinforces the dominant patterns of labour and the elaborate definitions of ideal femininity, which dislocated women's achievements from the worldly, promoting them into a celestial, ideal zone" (Randolph, 2002: 96).



attention to readings of historical representations of the ideal female body as an object and its conflicting responses. In pieces like *Inside Out* (Figure 50) the Venus figure, synonymous with idealised flesh imbued with eroticism (Hollander, 1993: 158–9), is intertwined with the profoundly realistic style of 19th Century 'anatomical illustration' that was the unembellished and established standard (Kemp & Wallace, 2000: 17). This implies contradictory approaches, as impartial science requires an object to be scrutinized with a detached gaze in contrast to the gaze directed at women that implores intimacy and personal connection. With this there is also the contestation of fantasy and reality. In the case of medical illustrations there is the intrinsic need to trust science as truthful and objective, while the Venus figure refers to the more emotive realm of fantasy, pleasure and the erotic.

### The cabinet

In the practical body of work, cabinets that house images of beauty make reference to preservation and cataloguing central to the herbarium and medical collections. These cabinets also refer to furnishings associated with the female boudoir and the pursuits of beauty. Traditionally, both the cabinet and boudoir exhibit a very different and conflicting relationship to that which they collect and attempt to preserve. Both require looking, but for different purposes. The one claims objective distance, the other interaction and intimacy. The one seeks a specimen – an object, the other a subject. My cabinets seek to blur and negotiate the relationship between object and subject. They make reference to multiple and continually shifting associations of beauty as spectacle, treasure, object, curiosity, medical specimen, and 'other'...

What we find the most desirable is the most beautiful; what is beautiful we wish to possess. (Marwick, 1988: 44)

In the work, the drawers of the cabinets suggest a promise they cannot fulfil. The expectation of the drawer as a repository for artefacts is denied – they

are objectless. In these 'display cases' the absent object is replaced by a two-dimensional representation on the transparent glass surface. The desire to possess is frustrated by the lack of the real object and consequently possession is denied.

Possession of the 'object' is often deemed vital in the fulfilment of desire. This belief can, however, be expanded on beyond the artefact to include the woman's body. As Marwick relays in *Beauty in History*, the desire 'to possess beautiful objects' can be extended to the wish to 'sexually possess beautiful human beings' (Marwick, 1988: 39). Irigaray draws attention to the reduction of the woman's body to that of an object, which negates individual subjecthood, when the fulfilment of desire is contingent on possession in the sexual act (Irigaray, 2004: 4–6). In relation to visual culture, the belief in the objectification of the woman for possession by the male gaze has been underlined extensively – particularly in the critical works of Berger (1972) and Mulvey (1975). In discussing the representation of the female form in *Border Crossings: Womanliness, body, representation*, Hilary Robinson asserts that 'to-be-looked-at-ness' prevalent in the European and North American visual discourse is based on the '...desire to possess the woman/image, the desire for power over the object' (Robinson, 1995: 140).

It can, however, be argued that the 'possession' of traditional representations of female beauty as objects is thwarted by traditional paintings' inherent qualities of representation – its very two-dimensional objecthood. Marcia Pointon (1990) elucidates on this as a power inherent in representations of bodily beauty when accessed as an object. She asserts that these representations cannot be completely inhibited or commanded by either the artist that creates it or the viewer that looks at it. As in the case of an 'invented' representation, the only ingress available to the viewer is 'psychically, not physically' – 'the desire to look, and 'possess' by looking, in the end only demonstrates that looking is not the same as

'having' (Leppert, 1996: 214). Indeed as Stendhal remarks, "Beauty is no more than the promise of a good time" (Marwick, 1988: 40). To this one can add the *representation of beauty* is no more than the promise of a good time. The power to induce desire and simultaneously deny the gratification of it lies within the representation – the object of desire remains objectless. This draws attention to the relationship between the continually intangible veracity that images often portend to portray, the desires to own these 'realities' remaining perpetually unfulfilled (Preziosi, 1998: 451, 452). By creating drawers in the cabinets that possess no objects, only images, there is an intentional play on the inherent quality of two-dimensional representation that denies possession.

It is in this sense that the cabinets in the practical work function as catalogues of historical objects of desire that act more like a memory/mind bank. There are no objects, only their 'representations' and the potential and shifting 'realities' they portray (Preziosi, 1998: 451). In the work the object has been replaced by its visual signifier underlining the ability of the image to make meaning beyond the physical presence of its subject. Venus is a case in point. There is thus the underlying intention of relaying the difference between the objects 'in themselves' and their 'significances' with their shifting connotations and denotations (Preziosi, 1998: 451).

However, the representations in the work are also copies, albeit that they are no longer the perfect copy as they have been reworked, fragmented, dissected and recontextualised. Addressing the qualities inherent in the recontextualised copy and its relationship to the original image, Paula Marincola (speaking on the work of Sherrie Levine) describes it as functioning as 'the ghost of a ghost'. Barbara Kruger suggests it as '...a perpetual ghost with a perpetual presence' (Welchman, 2001: 12). Welchman proposes that the copy induces a sense of 'a haunting of the real' (Welchman, 2001: 14). Indeed, in my own work there is a similar dynamic

at work where the images, representations, allegories, and symbols function as 'ghosts' that haunt an interpretation of historical representations of beauty and my own experience of it in the present. The reflective surface of the glass and mirror sections in turn creates a copy/reproduction of the image of the viewer where the subject of the copy is, however, present.

### Natured

In the practical body of work there is a thematic and recurrent relationship between plant matter- and interior bodily systems. This relationship functions both figuratively and literally where the images feed off each other and meet thematically in the contested realm of nature. In *Colophon* (Figure 53) veins quite literally feed into stems and a heart grows into branches. My intention is to represent the women's relationship to nature, not as temporary or simply a 'static backdrop' (Solnit, 2001: 45), but as an association that has become historically embedded into the substance/being of the woman as an embodiment of beauty.

By aligning the idealised female body with aspects of nature, there is a referencing of the traditional problematic that places female beauty either passively or ominously outside of what is perceived as 'male' culture. It bears witness to the difficulty and multiplicity of visual representations of feminine beauty and identity in relation to nature. Through the visual and thematic amalgamation of the idealised body and nature it is not my desire to return to the ideals of an Arcadian past or conversely to a utopian space where domination and control over nature separate women from the notion of male-dominated culture. Rather, the intention of the work is to call these issues to mind and recontextualise them in the present, where a changing sensitivity to nature that emphasises the importance and celebration of our relationship to the natural world is perceptible.

In the treatment of viscera and organs in relation to fauna and flora, my objective has also been to

render the interior of the body as a part of beauty and imbue it with femininity that has often been denied by representations focussed exclusively on the exterior body as a site of beauty. In *Colophon* (Figure 53) the body of the Venus is opened to reveal what could arguably be described as a beautiful blood circulatory system fused with foliage. My intention has been to fracture perceptions of ideal beauty in representations of the past as a body that consisted out of smooth, flawless, shells that covered an interior of perceived repulsion. Herein lies a desire to make the physical interior another avenue of beauty. This thematically relates to what Solnit names the 'exquisite' that functions in a space where 'the repulsive and the beautiful intersect – or rather the zone where what is conventionally considered the most beautiful – the female body – and what is conventionally considered most repulsive – also the female body – intersect' (Solnit, 2001: 212). This desire is evident in my work where bodily interiors are merged with signifiers of nature to suggest delicate lace-like trceries or organs turning into flowering bulbs. In *Return* (Figure 52) this intention is again perceptible as the rendition of the back ripples ribbon-like behind the body encasing it. The intention is therefore to envisage the interior, biological corporeality not as 'a cheat on beauty', but rather to recognise it as an active and essential part of its quintessence (Solnit, 2001: 216).

In some senses representations of the interior elements in my work become ornaments that collude with traditional associations of femininity and beauty. In others they deny the foreignness of the interior and relegate it to that which can be deemed as beautiful, so as to counter the threatening correlations between women and their bodily interiors. The work then operates on the boundary between underlining and breaking apart historical representations of female beauty. It functions unnervingly but consciously on this contradictory level as a mode of inquiry.

But, as I have argued, beauty is confounded with

notions of multiplicity and contradiction, which remains a central concern in the practical work, and is extended by the various iconographical elements that are assimilated and referenced. This is discernible in the shifting connotations and conflicting iconographic denotations of fauna and particularly flora that have been highly ambiguous historically in relation to visual pleasures.

Renditions of fauna and flora make up a vast component of the imagery in the practical work that also draws on the iconographic meanings associated with certain aspects of nature. Flowers such as the rose, as explicated in the appendix (page 80), were historically attributed to the idealised body of Venus as signifiers of love, fecundity, beauty and sexuality. Like the daisy that shares these similar traditional associations to female beauty, flowers at their most simplistic scientific explanation act as 'the seed bearing part of a plant, consisting of the reproductive organs' (Pearsell, 1999: 546) as rendered in the piece *Body of text* (Figure 48) as a life source. Other symbols function similarly in the practical body of work. In the piece *Ornament* (Figure 51) butterflies coincide with a highly decorative use of plant matter as well as being associated with beauty (Biedermann, 1992: 52) and the pollination of flowers. Simultaneously, however, the butterfly, like the flowers under discussion here, has through cultural invention also come to function as *vanitas* symbols and *memento mori*.

In the flowers that beautify and ornament embodiments of ideal beauty, lies the contradiction between life and death, pleasure and condemnation. This is echoed throughout the work in relation to the appreciation of the female beauty. While the flower decorates the external site of beauty, it often suggests that that beauty does not extend beyond the exterior as it ornaments a body of spiritual depravity and vanity. In the piece *Vanity for...* (Figure 45) the renderings of beauty through the decorative use of the anemone and the female, contrast its *vanitas* meaning of death and



immorality that necessitates a denial and denouncement of beauty, its subject and the viewer. Hence I decorate the site of supposed depravity – the interior sex organs to underline this assumption and simultaneously challenge it. These themes of beauty as death and love and death and life also develop the strategy of 'dissection' in the work as the renderings of idealised bodies in a state of dissection also references life and death, eros and thanatos. This contradictory relationship between beauty and the woman in my work is extended by another *vanitas* symbol – the mirror.

### The Looking Glass

The looking glass is a central theme in this body of work. It suggests the act of looking, perceiving, scrutinising, and beautification, while making reference to the conflicting attitudes towards beauty and its pleasures that I have discussed throughout this dissertation. The tension in relation to beauty, its cultural and historical interpretation and the real woman can be articulated well through the symbolic mirror. Up to the present the mirror persists in being 'the privileged and vulnerable site of femininity' (Melchior-Bonnet, 2002: 271).

In relation to the practical body of work I use the term 'looking glass' as this encompasses the idea of the mirror, but also glass that has both the properties of *reflection and transparency*. In the work the use of glass plays a fundamental role. The transparent medium of glass allows one to see not only a reflection/image as the mirror's reflects a perceivable image, but also 'through' it. This idea of the 'see through' (Pointon in Leppert, 1996: 214) characteristic of transparency is intended to function in both a literal and figurative sense in relation to the art historical representations of beauty in the work.

Many of the practical works make use of appropriated examples of the woman's mirror from art history. This is suggestive of the mirror as an object that is traditionally loaded with connotations of both negation and celebration of women's

beauty. In the work many references are made to the mirror beyond being pictorially rendered in images themselves. The cabinets housing the works are suggestive of dressing tables, and the cheval glass is associated with the woman's boudoir and its implied activities of beautification. These pieces are symmetrical and the prints that accompany them often exhibit texts that can be read from both sides of the work. These strategies make these 'looking glasses' accessible from the back and front allowing the viewer to move around images, texts and drawers that do not intend to preference either side. The presence of the looking glass is further suggested by the lithographic prints on the reflective glass surfaces that hint at being mirror-like reflections themselves, while sections of mirror film adhered to the glass peek through prints or create diversely-shaped mirrors. The shape of the format in *Duality* (Figure 49) and *Inside Out* (Figure 50) echoes the oval shapes synonymous with the mirror.

The collection of images of female beauty in the cabinets references the attempted possession and preservation of beauty and makes structural references to the furniture of the boudoir and the traditional mirror. These images captured on glass and inserted in drawers are representations of beauty that remain youthful beyond the hand of time and draw on the intense anxiety associated with ageing female beauty (Freedman, 1986: 202–3). As Symons (1979) states, the physical characteristics associated with youthfulness are undoubtedly the principal aspects on which a woman's physical beauty is judged (Marwick, 1988: 43). While Sandra Bartky, in referring to societal demands put on women, broaches the ban on growing older and underlines its requirement of maintaining the body's beauty to 'remove it from time' (Bartky, 1990: 40). Indeed, Freedman asserts that numerous women experience ageing as a shortcoming as beauty is such a central part of their understanding of their feminine selfhood (Freedman, 1986: 202).

A direct example of this pursuit is the work *Mirror*

Me (Figure 47) that is dependent on the reflection of the mirror. In the first drawer a grid of mirror shapes, that require scrutiny like the specimen slide and fragments the Venus figure. This inspection is, however, underlined by the mantra-like text that calls for maintenance and preservation. The second drawer again echoes this concern as the image in the mirror shape is made up of recipes (both ancient and contemporary) to maintain beauty. The viewer is incorporated into the piece by the mirror film that inserts their reflection amongst the formulas for youth. The 'preservation' of these images of female beauty can be seen in the context of the significance of the images in the creation of identity in relation to women (Bartky, 1990: 28, 40) and a 'process of (mis)representation and (mis)recognition in which we find our sexed identity' (Tickner, 1984: 359).

As seen in the example above, the reflective glass and mirror allow for the introduction of the viewer's image into the 'looking glass'. It is in the fragments of mirror that the viewer can catch their own likeness. This reflection alerts the viewer to his or her physical presence in relation to the image of the idealised body. These fragments of mirrored surface are small in scale and the sudden awareness of their presence is brought about by the disconnected reflection of the viewer's eye or a section of their face or body. Potentially there is the viewer's awareness of both looking and the inability to see their own body as an entirety, as a (w)hole. This incomplete or fractured mirroring of the viewer acts as a metaphorical link to the difficulty associated with the ideal and the mirror image in relation to personal identity formation of women as well as the multiplicity of the art historical mirror of beauty (See Section 1.2).

The fragments of mirror attached to the glass further attempt to disrupt the act of looking by awareness that one is the onlooker. Hence the fragments bring into question the nature of this look or gaze. Awareness of looking compels investigation into the nature of this gaze and Venus

(as an idealised beauty in the mirror) offers multitudes of contesting and continually shifting possibilities. This raises questions of scopophilia, voyeuristic fantasy as well as narcissistic identification. These references to the mirror aim to draw the viewer into this site of sight, reinforcing viewing as a personalised one-on-one experience, while allowing for a meeting of the observer and the observed, the viewer and the art object.

The mirrored double becomes an important cipher in the work relating to women's complex relationship to beauty and pleasure. The pictorial doubling of the Venus figure is seen in several of the works – *Body of text*, *Duality*, *Intoxication*, and *Ornament* – while the images set on cabinets and presented on oval glass are suggestive of being potential doubles themselves. In my work the doubling of the figures refers to notions of vanity, narcissism and identificatory narcissism. Mirror fragments create a double of the spectator drawing him or her into the position of the double – the object/subject relationship – potentially allowing a space for auto-analytic introspection.

Based on the Freudian premise of lack, and the feminist reading of internalised patriarchy, the 'narcissistic' double can be associated with control and mastery (Bartky, de Beauvoir). In pieces such as *Duality*, *Intoxication*, and *Ornament* the hollowed abdomens act as a visual suggestion of these particular difficulties that are associated with narcissism and narcissistic identification. Similarly, in *Body of text* the doubled figures, one holding up the traditional mirror of vanity and the other a diminutive copy of her image, also draw on these concerns. The doubled figures and the mirror consequently refer to the woman's dilemmas of appreciating beauty associated with traditional vanity, narcissism and identificatory narcissism. They do, however, also allow for a reading of potential pleasure in line with the changing attitude to women's narcissism and beauty. New theories on beauty (Steiner, Scarry, Lamberts, Frueh) have suggested ways of accessing beauty that suggest

pleasurable reciprocity. Changing perceptions on vanity, narcissism and identificatory narcissism (Frost, Kofman, Stacey) have also underlined the beneficial enjoyment that an engagement with beauty can facilitate. The perspectives that encourage narcissism and narcissistic identification as a positive pleasure, like brief moments during the Italian Renaissance, act as a counter to viewing images of female beauty exclusively as vehicles of patriarchal domination and a pleasure exclusively reserved for the male viewer. In the work images of idealised beauty can suggest the potential for the activation of a viewer-subject relationship of intimacy, desire and pleasure (so long denied as outmoded by modernist agendas that negated the figure of beauty and feminist vilification as a patriarchal trope). Hence these 'looking glasses' also allow a potentially positive narcissistic experience and interaction, acting as a platform for the re-engagement with historical representations of beauty today. The looking glasses build a relationship between the observer and observed, between beauty and the viewer.

Through fracture and dissection the idealised representations of female beauty in these 'looking glasses' bear witness to their habitual historical guises of sinner, whore, object and temptress. This acts as a suggestion of the often damaging and negative attitudes exhibited towards women's beauty. This project has however not been an attempt to deny their beauty. Instead I have also consciously sought to imbue these bodies with aspects of feminine beauty that attempts to celebrate this quality that can encourage pleasure. As stated in the introduction of this dissertation, my practical body of work attempts to integrate and appropriate those features of past representations which reveal attitudes to beauty (both historical ones and my own). They suggest that these are continual reflections of shifting attitudes, rather than images of the truth.



## 3.2 individual works

Figure 45

*Vanity for...*  
2006

Lithographs on glass  
with hand painted  
purpose-made cabinet  
from MDF board

Overall dimensions:  
190 x 70 x 20 cm

In *Vanity for...* a historically idealised beauty considers herself in the iconographical mirror of vanity. Instead of seeing her face she is confronted by the image of herself and this mirror. The abdomen of the figure has been removed, suggestive of emptiness and incompleteness, with a separate piece of glass displaying only the reproductive organs. Through 'visual dissection' and portrayal on the transparent glass the body's interior becomes as visually accessible as the exterior. This rendition has been backed by mirror film so that either a combination of this and the print or a reflection in the shape of the sexual organs is perceptible. This allows for the reflection of the viewer in this loaded space. A flowering and fruit-bearing plant, *Ribes rubrum* (red currant) has been amalgamated with the uterus. Images in the drawers also reveal a fusing of plant and body as cut-out silhouettes against a mirror show the transformation of this idealised body into a flower, making reference to the traditional and problematic association of women with nature.



Figure 46

*Intoxication*

2006

Lithographs on glass  
with hand painted  
purpose-made cabinet  
from MDF board

Overall dimensions:  
190 x 70 x 20 cm

As the title suggests, this work deals with the notion of beauty as infatuating and enrapturing, while also being potentially hazardous. It is suggestive of many historical associations with vanity and narcissism. The texts around the doubled Venus figures are printed on both sides of the glass, interweaving different historical and contemporary information like a palimpsest framing the figures with an oval shape reminiscent of the mirror. The texts that are predominantly concerned with the vine refer to the traditional association between women and nature, while playing with the notion of narcissistic 'intoxication' with the image of self that the doubled Venus figures suggest. The cabinet on which the reflective glass rests suggests the dressing table, but also makes reference to the herbarium and medical cabinet. The drawers that reference the specimen slide, exhibit indistinguishable microscopic details of the human body and plant matter and are framed by silhouetted mirror shapes. This is suggestive of the conflicting, but also often intersecting, gazes that pursue beauty and/or science.





Figure 47

*Mirror Me*

2006

Lithographs on glass  
with hand painted  
purpose-made cabinet  
from MDF board

Overall dimensions:  
190 x 70 x 20 cm

In *Mirror Me*, the main image (the figure) gazes at her reflection in the mirror that contains a traditional *memento mori* symbol – a human skull. Her own image (which could potentially induce pleasure and admiration) is absent. The consciously pale print of the body in combination with the glass allows the ability to see through most of this image. Beyond the disrupted 'Venus' body a delicate nervous system is merged with decorative foliage. This attempts to infuse this bodily interior with beauty and femininity as this has often been denied historically. The cabinet contains renderings of oval-shaped cut-outs of various sizes that both organise and fracture the images they contain. In the first drawer an oval grid partitions the main figure's face, while overlaid texts repeat words pertaining to preservation and maintenance. In the second drawer formulas for maintaining youthfulness concentrate on the activities of cleansing and purging. The last drawer's grid organises minute 'Venuses' with phases from the lifecycle of the butterfly, while textual elements underline the pursuits of 'seeing' and 'keeping'.





Figure 48

*Body of text*  
2006

Lithographs on glass  
with hand painted  
purpose-made cabinet  
from MDF board  
Overall dimensions:  
190 x 70 x 20 cm

In the piece *Body of text* a hollowed representation of a female body is created by interlacing a multitude of texts referencing botany, flower symbolisms, myth and the medicinal uses of flowers. The decorative floral centre that loosely references the female reproductive organs is made up of the *Bellis perennis*/daisy, which has been backed with mirror film. On a separate piece of glass two 'Venuses' interlock arms, while not looking at each other. The one is staring into an empty mirror, while the other gazes at a miniature replica of herself. In the cabinet below layers of glass exhibit root-like patterns in which spiders and ants crawl. A faint image of a face is perceptible in one of these roots that connects with the legs in the image above. As in all the cabinets, there are no objects to possess potentially, and this cabinet in particular allows the viewer to look all the way through the interior of the cabinet and what it represents.



Figure 49

*Duality*

2006

Lithographs on glass  
with hand painted  
purpose-made cabinet  
from MDF board

Overall dimensions:

190 x 43 x 40 cm

University of Cape Town

*Duality* combines multiple oval-shaped glass pieces with a hollowed cabinet that references the perforated bodies in the 'looking glass' suspended above it. When looking through the central cavity in the cabinet all the images in the drawers can be accessed visually at the same time. This feature and the transparent glass again make reference to the idea of 'see through' discussed previously. Suspended over the cabinet the oval-shaped 'looking glass' contains two pairs of doubles. In the one pair two 'Venuses' peer at each other, while a posterior piece of glass exhibits two silhouetted faces that look away from each other, drawing on the multiple and conflicting attitudes toward narcissism and narcissistic identification. In the cabinet a cut-out thistle shape reveals aspects of the human viscera and a microscopic view of the stomach tissue is combined with legends referencing the *Silybum marianum* (thistle).



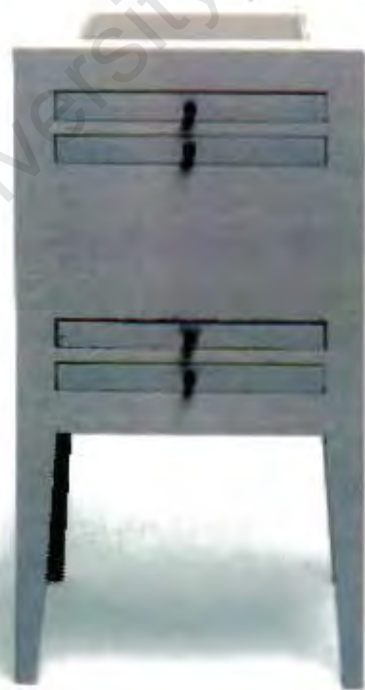


Figure 50

*Inside Out*

2006

Lithographs on glass  
with hand painted  
purpose-made cabinet  
from MDF board

Overall dimensions:

190 x 43 x 40 cm

In *Inside Out* the idealised body is hollowed to exhibit a rendition of the internal digestive organs of the abdomen. This manipulation of the body attempts to disrupt the typical attributes of idealised bodily perfection by referencing both nudity and nakedness as discussed, while also drawing on the often conflicting approaches of 19th Century scientific practice. The naming and classification of organs are suggestive of the separation of the body into an object of collected parts – a kind of 'dismemberment' overlayed by a linear grid. In the drawers of the accompanying cabinet are images of greatly enlarged nerve cells that have been merged with foliage that 'grows' in between and through layers of glass, revealing pictorial sections of the bodily interior like a puzzle. This amalgamation of bodily and plant matter is suggestive of the body as a part of nature and beauty, but also an inheritor of 19th Century scientific practice.





Figure 51

*Ornament*  
2006  
Lithographs on glass  
with hand painted  
purpose made cabinet  
from MDF board  
Overall dimensions:  
135 x 53 x 104cm

This work's structure references the cheval glass associated with the women's boudoir and its symmetrical design is suggestive of a mirror's reflection. A central theme in the work is ornamentation and decorative detail that has been exaggerated to underline and perpetuate the often derogatory association of embellishment with female beauty. A textual floral border encompasses the central image. This text is mirrored so that it may be read from either side of the cabinet. The text on the 'looking glass' obsessively underlines and questions the validity of finding beauty in oneself and what purpose is of finding beauty. It relates to the often conflicting associations with women's narcissism. This text is also repeated in the drawers and reflects the viewer's gaze in the shapes of butterflies and flowers. Women's relationship to nature is suggested in the central image that is made up of *Hellebore niger* (poisonous when consumed) that on closer inspection plays home to two Venus figures, but also ominous insects, as a multitude of worms eat at the flowering plant.

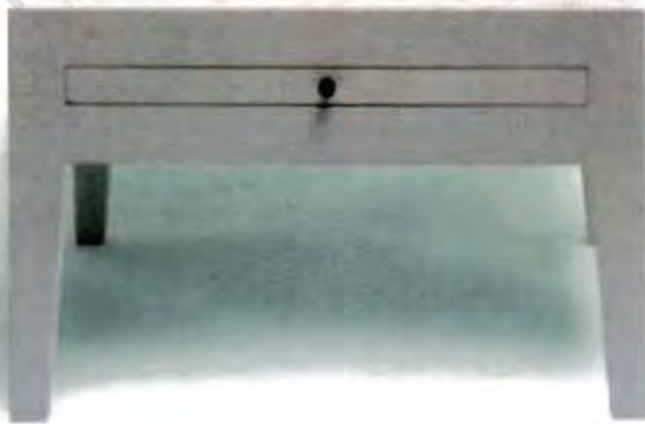


Figure 52

*In Return*

2006

Lithographs on glass  
with hand painted  
purpose-made cabinet  
from MDF board

Overall dimensions:

135 x 53 x 104 cm

In the piece *In Return* a mirrored spinal column is perceptible through the figure that turns her head towards the viewer. This representation of idealised beauty is contained within an elongated page on which text concerning two toxic flowering plants, the narcissus and the hellebore, is displayed. This draws loosely on the characteristics of floral *vanitas* symbols that portray beauty and vitality, but simultaneously references death and moral 'poisoning' in relation to earthly pleasure. In some cases this text has been reversed and inverted – the text only being discernable through its absence on the page. In the cabinet one of the drawers contains an enlarged negative image of the main figure that is overlaid with rows of insects. In the accompanying drawer the typical rendition of bodily organs and tissues makes way for a pictorial collection of human bones. Here a cut-out silhouette on a diminutive page suggests the main figure's absence/presence. Reflective mirror film attached on the reverse side of the glass instead suggests the presence of the viewer in this space.





Figure 53

*Colophon.*

2006

Lithographs on glass  
with hand painted  
purpose-made cabinet  
from MDF board

Overall dimensions:  
195 x 69 x 10 cm

University of Cape Town

This piece consists of three moveable frames that reference a book and/or a wall-mounted cabinet. The anatomically incomplete rendition of beauty clutches a pomegranate, while her face has been manipulated to resemble my own. Through the void in the body the heart and blood circulatory system are merged with a *Passiflora incarnata* (passion vine), while the rest of the plant almost imperceptibly filters through the figure to create a palimpsest effect. Mirror film affixed to the glass ornaments the 'plant' while reflecting and fragmenting the viewer. The stretching 'Venus' figure almost seems to display her 'visually dissected' body and seemingly announces her interior physicality that is rendered not to negate beauty, but as an integral part of her.



### 3.3 formal and technical choices

All pieces were produced by drawing on stereotypical 'Venus' figures (idealised, sexually-virile beauties) from paintings of the late Middle Ages and Renaissance (from both northern and southern Europe) as well as Dutch Mannerist works. These images were scanned and then removed from their respective contexts and digitally manipulated in *Adobe Photoshop*. This meant the removal and addition of physiological aspects of the figures, but also sometimes adding body parts that were invisible or obstructed in the actual paintings in order to create the images. Each image underwent extensive reworking, some subtler than others, as new elements were introduced and old elements accentuated or removed. In particular I made use of cropping, mirroring and distortion. A similar process was undertaken with the images of flora and fauna as well as the biological details that were predominantly sourced from 19th Century medical and anatomical illustrations. These were often altered to create the illusion of plant matter and organs growing out of each other. Text-based elements were edited, assembled and reworked to create a palimpsest effect with texts dating from Aristotle to contemporary texts. Insects, butterflies and flowers were also collected from diverse sources, scanned and digitally manipulated in *Photoshop* to create the final images.

Once an image was created it was layered in *Photoshop*, so that a whole image would only be perceivable when all the layers were superimposed over each other. (The larger images all comprise three layers in the resolution of the final image.) Working on the same principal, smaller pieces were made, experimenting with differing numbers of layers, which facilitated a play on dimension and visibility in relation to

transparency. Each layer was saved to scale at 300 dpi and made into a stochastically screened lithographic plate for printing. The stochastically screened plate enabled incredibly fine detail to be preserved, which would not have been possible with a manually processed photo plate.

The substrate for the printing of all the images was glass. For the printing process the glass was cut and the edges smoothed to the maximum size that the lithography press allowed. Printing on the glass became a highly technical matter that necessitated trial and error to perfect the technique to attain the precision of printing on paper. As images were created out of multiple layers and often needed printing on both sides of the glass, registration became a key issue that frequently necessitated the adjustment of the gripper edge on the press despite registration of the image on the plate. Actual printing required the lowering of the press bed to facilitate the 4 mm and 3 mm thick glass sheets. The amount of lowering of the press bed and subsequent pressure exerted by the rollers were instrumental in gaining a successful image. Too much pressure would crack the glass, while too little pressure produced no image at all. As glass is non-absorbent and extremely smooth, a fine balance had to be achieved between the moistness of the wetting rollers and the dryness of the plate to negotiate the appearance of an image. The environmental temperature, which is always an issue when printing, became even more important due to the sensitivity of the process. Very hot days became especially hazardous as plate and image became increasingly unstable and controlling the ink deposits on the glass became more unpredictable than usual.

After the images were printed, the drying period, dependant on the weather, was normally 1 to 2 days after which the prints could be moved. Post-print most of the images were finished by adhering reflective mirror foil cut-outs to the unprinted surface of the images. The intention was to create



added depth to images, while assisting in the symbolic extension of the mirror theme. The foil and area of adhesion were cleaned and moistened and the foil placed into position, after which air bubbles were smoothed out and excess water was removed. Surplus foil was eliminated with a blade while the area was still wet and not fully adhered. Full adhesiveness, also dependant on the weather, was achieved after about 1 to 3 days.

Smaller pieces destined for drawers in the cabinets were cut from fully printed sheets of glass after printing and drying. This proved to be a delicate process as minute particles of glass from the cutting process easily scratched the images. The only pieces cut prior to printing were the large ovals seen in *Duality* (Figure 49) and *Inside Out* (Figure 50). Prior attempts at first printing and then cutting were unsuccessful as the cutting damaged the prints. The large ovals were

therefore first cut and then printed by using a cut-out template positioned on the press bed. After the cutting and adhesion of the mirrored sections to the glass, the surfaces were cleaned and buffed.

Glass pieces were then mounted in and on cabinets. As discussed before, the cabinets were designed to reference both the fixtures associated with the mirror in the boudoir (such as the dressing table and cheval glass), as well as cabinets of preservation and cataloguing found in the herbarium and medical collections. The unembellished designs and more contemporary appearance of these pieces attempted to contrast the historical images and add to the suggestion of 'Venus' being 'revisited'. The manufacture of these designs was outsourced and constructed from MDF board and sprayed with a base coat of paint. The pieces were then hand painted white and sanded.

## appendix: flower symbolism

The following descriptions act as a key to the meaning of the flowers of the time periods in question reproduced in the practical body of work. They also act as a vehicle to convey the migratory and multiple meanings of these signs that confront us with such diverse ideological approaches. The following symbols bear witness to the ambiguous and changing nature of many traditional symbols.

### The Rose

According to myth the rose is 'sacred' to Venus. At first it was white, then is said to have turned red from her blood when she stepped on a thorn as she rushed to her expiring lover, Adonis (Hall, 1996: 268, 320). In some legends Venus is also associated with the origin of the rose. Its creation is told to be a bitter exploit on the part of Cybil, the Roman goddess of nature, as it was said that just the rose could exceed Venus in loveliness (Heilmeyer, 2001: 74). During the Renaissance, it was this flower in particular that was attributed to Venus because of its beautiful bloom and smell, the piercings by its thorns associated with 'the wounds of love' (Hall, 1996: 320). This pleasure and pain is associated with the love that was so adoringly lamented by Italian poets.

Early Christians believed the rose to be a flower of ill repute associated with heathen 'decadence' (Heilmeyer, 2001: 74). However, it becomes subsumed into Christian symbolism and is assigned to the Virgin (Heilmeyer, 2001: 74). Here we see the transformation of the rose from earthly, sensual pleasure symbol to that of a heavenly asexual device. As such only chaste maidens were allowed to don garlands of roses during the Middle Ages (Biedermann, 1992: 290). The Virgin was also known as the 'thornless rose' – without fault (St Ambrose recalls a fable whereby the rose only grows thorns subsequent to the *Fall of Man* (Hall, 1996: 268)) or the 'Mystic Rose' (Garibaldi & Moore, 2003: 24). In relation to the Virgin, a red rose denoted her chasteness (Garibaldi & Moore, 2003: 21), while a white rose often relayed the Virgin's immaculateness (Hall, 1996: 268).<sup>21</sup> The rose would also become an important aspect of *vanitas* symbolism that was directly linked with notions of transience and the fragility of the earthly existence. Cesare Ripa, in his *Iconologia* (1593) that served as a resource of instruction, explication and thematic material for artists of this epoch, wrote:

The rose is a symbol of our fragile nature... And very correctly is our life compared to a rose, which is truly beautiful and pleasant yet withers and

fades in the same day. (Garibaldi & Moore, 2003: 70)

The rose also functioned, as it does today, as a symbol of mortal love (Leppert: 1996: 49) as seen in Figure 58, where a couple exchanges this flower.



Figure 58. Master of the Housebook. Circa 1484. Engagement Portrait of a Young Couple. (Grössinger, 1997: 62).

### The Thistle

According to Greek myth the thistle was given to Phaon by Aphrodite as a symbolic reference to easy entrapment on its bristly tendrils (Heilmeyer, 2001: 26). In classical antiquity it was believed that the consumption of the thistle by an expectant woman would lead to the delivery of a male child and Pythagoras believed the *Centum capita*, a variety of thistle, to be an aphrodisiac (Biedermann, 1992: 341). The thistle's ability to grow in a barren environment leads to its association with ideas pertaining to 'enduring love' (Garibaldi & Moore, 2003: 65). With regard to Christianity, it was associated with sin and believed to be an accursed gift of hardship from the devil, deriving from the expulsion from paradise subsequent to the *Fall of Man* as noted 'accursed shall be the ground on your account. With labour you will win food from it all the days of your life. It will grow thistles and thorns for you' (Heilmeyer, 2001: 26).

### The Lily

Since antiquity the lily has represented virtue. Legend has it that Venus, annoyed at this floral display of wholesomeness, fitted the lily with its characteristically large pistil, evoking the notion of the male sex organ (Heilmeyer, 2001: 50). In the Middle Ages and Renaissance the lily is again reinvented as a symbol of purity, associated with the Virgin (Leppert, 1996: 49) and many of the female saints known for their chastity (Hall, 1996: 192). Images of this kind were often rendered *sans pistil* to underline its use as a symbol of chastity (Heilmeyer, 2001: 50).

### The Daisy

The daisy is also identified with Venus in both antiquity and the Renaissance (Heilmeyer, 2001: 56). Despite this

Christianity appropriates it as a symbol of pure love and diffidence of the Virgin Mary (Garibaldi & Moore, 2003: 18). During the 13th Century it is known as the love flower or *flos amoris* and it becomes part of 15th Century culture in the form of a love game still played today – the pulling of the petals one by one, while alternately saying 's/he-loves-me, s/he-loves-me-not' – with the final petal indicating the outcome (Heilmeyer, 2001: 56).

### The Violet

Once again antiquity associated Aphrodite with the violet (Heilmeyer, 2001: 9), but during the Middle Ages it became a Christian symbol of humility and modesty, particularly of the Virgin, as well as loyalty and fidelity (Garibaldi & Moore, 2003: 33). As the flowers of this plant are barren it self-pollinates and hence functions as an ideal symbol to suggest the virtuous conception by the Virgin Mother of the Christ child (Heilmeyer, 2001: 84).

### The Anemone

This flower is linked to Aphrodite and Adonis and is related to death (Heilmeyer, 2001: 22). There are varying accounts as to their mythological origin with some believing that they originated from the blood of Adonis as he lay dying (Biedermann, 1992: 4), while in other accounts anemones stem from Aphrodite's tears for her dead lover (Heilmeyer, 2001: 22). During the Middle Ages the anemone is again associated with anguish and loss, its hue indicating the altruism of Jesus and the Christian saints (Heilmeyer, 2001: 22). As a *vanitas* symbol it was seen as an indicator of the transient nature of life. Consequently it appears coupled with the phrase *Brevis et Usus* (Goodchild, 2003: 83) in numerous emblem books.

### The Apple

According to ancient Greek myth Dionysus, the god of wine, who offered it to Aphrodite, produced the apple and as such the apple during antiquity is ascribed to her (Biedermann, 1992: 16). Paris is also said to have bestowed Venus with a 'golden apple' as a prize, after judging her as the most beautiful of all the goddesses (Hall, 1996: 180). Like other fruit the apple has also been linked with the female body in a sexual manner, the breasts have been

compared to this fruit and the centre of a bisected apple has been associated with the vulva (Biedermann, 1992: 16). The consumption of fruit is seen as symbolic of carnal desire during the Middle Ages and this can be related directly to the associations between Eve, the 'apple' and the *Fall of Man*. In this biblical context the apple indicates transgression and enticement (Biedermann, 1992: 16). The picking or reaching for the apple in Medieval and Renaissance representations is predominantly a function performed by Eve. Michelangelo's rendition of the *Fall* adorning the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel represents Adam voluntarily attempting to pick this fruit. This is, however, the exception to general pictorial portrayals. Fabricius in his *Disputatio Theologica qau Historia sacra contra nonnullos pictorum errores vindicatur* (1684) would underline representations like these as incorrect as Adams non-participation is unequivocally asserted in the Bible (Boeckl, 1998: 836).

The apple has been replaced by the fig and pomegranate as surrogates to the apple from the Biblical Tree of Knowledge (Biedermann 1992: 16) (Hall, 1996: 249) in a variety of customs. The fig was attributed to Dionysus – god of wine – and Priapus – the fecund deity known for his enormous phallus (Hall, 1996: 252) during antiquity, which Biedermann suggests helps locate the fig's sensual correlations (Biedermann 1992: 16, 128). Not surprisingly in Medieval etymologies the Latin word *peccare* ('to sin') is associated with the Hebrew word *pag* ('fig'). (Biedermann 1992: 128). Indeed the leaves of the fig were used by Adam and Eve to conceal their genitals after the *Fall* (Hall, 1996: 121). The pomegranate, derived from the 'old' French *pome grenate* (meaning 'apple with many seeds'), was associated with fecundity and therefore also Venus during ancient times (Biedermann, 1992: 271). The pomegranate plant signified ardour, espousal and ensuing offspring. It was thus strongly associated with fertility and Cybele was supposed to have conceived by simply laying a finger on the tree of this fruit (Biedermann, 1992: 272). However, during the Middle Ages this fruit and tree became a symbol of purity and virginity, with the Virgin Mary often portrayed resting under the tree with a unicorn (Hall, 1996: 249, 328).

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Wrancke, C. *Theatre d'Amor: The Garden of Love and its Delights*. Köln: Taschen. 2004.

Young, L. *The Book of the Heart*. London: Flamingo-HarperCollins. 2002.



# list of illustrations

Figure 1. Artist Unknown. 1st Century AD. *Venus* (Bowman, 2002: 1).

Figure 2. Artist Unknown. 2nd Century BC. *Venus de Milo* (Arscott & Scott, 2000: 2).

Figure 3. Meister Casper. 14th Century. *Venus of Herta* (Young, 2002: 183).

Figure 4. Meister Casper. 14th Century. *Venus of Herta* (detail) (Young, 2002: 183).

Figure 5. Titian. 1514. *Sacred and Profane Love* (Tinagli, 1997: 122).

Figure 6. Artist Unknown. 1531. *Venus and the Tortoise* (Seznec, 1972: 115).

Figure 7. Pieter Serwouters. 1622. *Aendachtig liedt-boeck* (*frontispiece*) (Sluijter, 2000: 123).

Figure 8. Jan Seanredam. Circa 1598–1601. *Allegory of Visus and the Art of Painting* (Sluijter, 2000: 88).

Figure 9. Jacob de Baker. Circa 1550. *Visus* (Sluijter, 2000: 93).

Figure 10. Artist Unknown. Circa 1400. *Venus-Luxuria* (Seznec, 1972: 107).

Figure 11. Hans Brosamer. Circa 1530. *A Whore Venerated by a Fool* (Grössinger, 1997: 128).

Figure 12. Sebastian Brandt. 1494. *Untitled* (*from Ship of Fools*) (Melchior-Bonnet, 2002: 210).

Figure 13. Artist Unknown. Circa 1498. *Demon and Frivolous Woman* (Rachleff, 1990: 85).

Figure 14. Anton Woensam. Circa 1552. *The Wise Woman* (Grössinger, 1997: 44).

Figure 15. Hans Baldung Grien. Circa 1510. *The Three Stages of Life, with Death* (Hagen, 1996: 37).

Figure 16. Artist Unknown. 15th Century. *The Garden of Nature* (Lucie-Smith, 1991: 40).

Figure 17. Hans Memling. 1485. *Vanity* (Mullins, 1985: 63).

Figure 18. Titian. 1518–19. *Worship of Venus* (Beck, 1999: 396).

Figure 19. Titian. Circa 1515. *A Woman at Her Toilet* (Olga's

Gallery, 2006: 1).

Figure 20. Jan Miense Molenaer. 1663. *Women at her Toilet – Lady World* (Gerten-Jackson, 1996: 1).

Figure 21. Artist Unknown. 15th Century. *The Garden of Nature* (Lucie-Smith, 1991: 40).

Figure 22. Artist Unknown. Circa 1600. *A Pair of Lovers* (Warnke, 2004: folio 123).

Figure 23. Master E.S. Circa 1460. *The Large Garden of Love* (Grossinger, 1997: 105).

Figure 24. Berthold Furtmeyer. 1481. *Eve and the Virgin in the Garden of Eden* (Gettings, 1978: 70).

Figure 25. Lucas Cranach, the Elder. Circa 1530. *Cupid Complaining to Venus* (Mullins, 1985: 123).

Figure 26. Giorgio Barbarelli (Giorgione). Circa 1508. *Concert Champêtre* (Mullins, 1985: 137).

Figure 27. Lucas Cranach, the Elder. 1530. *The Judgement of Paris* (Lucie-Smith, 1991: 179).

Figure 28. Artist Unknown. Circa 1497. *Hercules at the Crossroads – Voluptas vs. Virtus* (Grössinger, 1997: 17).

Figure 29. Clara Peeters. Circa 1610. *Vanitas* (Cal Poly Pomona, 2006: 1).

Figure 30. Juan de Valverde de Hamusco. 1589. *Tab. VI. Libri III.* (Petherbridge, 1997: 57).

Figure 31. Odoardo Fialetti. 1626. *Petal Venus*. (Petherbridge, 1997: 91).

Figure 32. Anonymous. 18th/19th Century. *Pregnant female figure*. (Petherbridge, 1997: 57).

Figure 33. Hasselhorst. 1887. *Lucae and his Assistants Dissecting a Female Cadaver*. (Jordanova, 1989:).

Figure 34. C.H. Huijberts after Fredrik Ruysch. 1744. *Decorative – Anatomical Display: Five Infant Skeletons*. (Leppert, 1996: 135).

Figure 35. Niki de Saint-Phalle. 1962. *Venus de Milo* (Wilson, 2000: 158).

Figure 36. Frida Kahlo. 1944. *The Broken Column* (Warner, 1985: 301).

Figure 37. Leora Farber. 1997. *Skin-Less VIII* (Friedman: 1997, 1).

Figure 38. Nina Teglio. 2005. *Real Dolls* (Skinner & Wisten: 2006, 95).

Figure 39. Orshi Drozdik. 1993. *Manufacturing Self. Body Self and Medical Venus* (Welchman, 2001: 114).

Figure 40. Ken Aptekar. 2004. *A biśl ħar mir, a biśl ħar dir*. (Cooley Art Gallery, 2004: 1).

Figure 41. Barbara Bloom. 1989. *The Reign of Narcissism* (Welchman, 2001: 194).

Figure 42. Kiki Smith. 1992. *Roses* (Fortier, 2006: 1).

Figure 43. Tracy Payne. 2005. *Toward Late Spring* (Monson, 2005: 41).

Figure 44. Tracy Payne. 2005. *Together We Can* (Monson, 2005: 40).

Figure 45. Cara van der Westhuizen. 2006. *Vanity For...*

Figure 46. Cara van der Westhuizen. 2006. *Intoxication*.

Figure 47. Cara van der Westhuizen. 2006. *Mirror Me*.

Figure 48. Cara van der Westhuizen. 2006. *Body of text*.

Figure 49. Cara van der Westhuizen. 2006. *Duality*.

Figure 50. Cara van der Westhuizen. 2006. *Inside Out*.

Figure 51. Cara van der Westhuizen. 2006. *Ornament*.

Figure 52. Cara van der Westhuizen. 2006. *In Return*.

Figure 53. Cara van der Westhuizen. 2006. *Colophon*.

Figure 54. Master of the Housebook. Circa 1484. *Engagement Portrait of a Young Couple* (Grössinger, 1997: 62).

University of Cape Town